



# THE EDUCATION CRISIS IN AUSTRALIA

A DISCUSSION PAPER COMMISSIONED FOR THE  
MANNKAL ECONOMIC EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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# Are Australia's Educational Standards Slipping?

It had never occurred to me that Australia's education systems may be less than perfect until 1992, when a chance comment was made during one of my first Melbourne book launches.

The book, *So I Headed West*, I had assembled from my collection of written material left by my grandfather, W.G. Manners.

He died 13 years before I was born. So, assembling this book was my way of getting to know him.

Why am I telling you this?

At one of the book launches an attendee, who had read the book, commented "your grandfather appeared to be a very well-educated person." Before I had a chance to comment, Prof. Geoffrey Blainey AC, stepped in and said, "they were all better educated in those days."

Ever since that event, now 31 years ago, I have observed a growing concern that Australia's educational standards may be slipping.

Of recent times, I sense a dramatic escalation in this process. During the Covid lockdowns parents, for the first time, became aware of the material being served up to students. Much of this material being taught strays far from what could be regarded as core educational material and I'm sure many would agree.

I'm not alone in expressing concern at our education system and seeking ways to improve what happens in our classrooms.

At this year's Sir John Downer oration, delivered in April in Adelaide, Mr Peter Dutton, MP also discussed Australia's failing education system, where he argued;

**"Ideologically driven advocates have too much influence over what is being taught to our children. We want our children to be educated, not indoctrinated. Our kids are being taught 'what to think' not, 'how to think'."**

Over recent years I've collected a 'mountain' of articles covering this concern at slipping educational standards.

What was I to do with this great heap of material?

Sensing that I would never complete this task, I enlisted the aid of two of Perth's leading academics and they have bravely waded through this material plus added their own astute observations.

I requested that they put their comments together in a form that is easily readable, rather than an obscure academic submission. I have a strong desire for the readers to clearly see the problem confronting us.

My enthusiasm for this form of paper stems from a conversation I once had with one of my favourite economists, Julian Simon, (1932 – 1998).

I remembered Julian's conversation when Stephen Moore, his former Research Assistant, commented in his eulogy to Julian;

**“Julian had an ebullient spirit, but from time to time he would complain to me that his writings never received the full recognition they deserved from academics. That was probably true, but I always reminded him that his work had had a more profound impact on the policy debate in Washington than that of any random selection of 100 of his academic peers combined.”**

This advice is what I had in mind when I asked Rocco and Matthew to assemble these papers, for your thoughtful reading.

Your responses and further anecdotes are invited and, with your permission, will be added to the comments section on our e-version of this document at [www.mannkal.org](http://www.mannkal.org)

## Ron Manners AO

Chairman & Founder  
Mannkal Economic Education Foundation



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# The Education Crisis in Australian Schools: What Must Be Done?

**Author: Dr Rocco Loiacono**

## Introduction

In Australia, governments of both political persuasions, at state, territory and federal levels, have a go-to policy to address problems: ramp up spending. Be it the NDIS, Snowy 2.0, the NBN, governments in this country believe with almost fanatical fervour that there is nothing that more money can't fix.

Education is no different.

This report will give an overview of how increased levels of funding to Australian schools have led to, paradoxically, declining educational standards, and looks at alternative models that have been tried in the past, and are being tried presently, with success, in order to arrest this decline.

## Increased funding under Gonski and falling standards

In 2010, businessman David Gonski AC was commissioned by Julia Gillard, the then Minister for Education in the Rudd government, to chair a committee to make recommendations regarding education funding in Australia. He called for the spending of an extra \$5 billion per year, and the government offered \$14.5 billion over six years. In 2012 he released 41 recommendations which accompanied Gillard's promise (who by then had displaced Rudd as prime minister) to propel Australia's school system into the world's top five by 2025, with its students among the leaders in reading, science and maths. They would have the teachers, librarians and interactive whiteboards they needed. Further, each child would have their own learning plan, so struggling students were not left behind and bright students did not disengage.<sup>1</sup>

"I feel a deep responsibility to ensure every child in Australia has the education they deserve," Gillard said at the time.

Some five years after, it became apparent that the increased investment in education was not delivering any return. Australian school students, rather than propelling Australia's system into the world's top five, were going backwards. Therefore, then-prime minister Malcolm Turnbull decided that the solution to the national crisis in literacy and numeracy that was developing was to spend even more money, and to ask none other than David Gonski just how it should be spent.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jordan Baker, 'No Gonski 'nirvana': Why Australia's most ambitious education reforms have failed', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 2022, <<https://www.smh.com.au/education/no-gonski-nirvana-why-australia-s-most-ambitious-education-reforms-have-failed-20220215-p59wpj.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Wild, Gideon Rozner, Evan Mulholland, Matthew Lesh and Bella d'Abrera, 'Boondoggling Australia', 1 August 2018, <<https://ipa.org.au/ipa-review-articles/boondoggling-australia>>

The Turnbull government’s funding plan for schools – the so-called Gonski 2.0, revealed in 2017, provided for the spending of \$242.3 billion, plus an extra \$5.1 billion on Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) between 2018 and 2027. However, as we shall discover, this ‘Quality Schools Package’ has only resulted in standards falling even further.

This is despite a 158-page report of the panel chaired by Gonski, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, that was released in March 2018, conceding that the billions of dollars spent on education in Australia resulted in neither growth nor excellence.

Quoting from the report itself:

In addition to declining performance, the review found that Australia has a significant gap between its highest and lowest performing students; far greater than in many OECD countries. Disturbingly, the review identified an unacceptable link between low levels of achievement and educational disadvantage, particularly among students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

Presently, state, territory and federal governments spend approximately \$60 billion a year on schools and mastering the basics is an essential part of every student’s education. What is more, Australian students are spending more time in the classroom than students in other countries, but the extra time, just like the extra money, is not necessarily proving to be beneficial. According to the OECD, Australia has fallen to 21<sup>st</sup> place out of 37 in international testing standards.<sup>4</sup>

An old adage tells us: ‘there are none so blind as those who do not want to see’.

So it is not just with our politicians, but also with the bureaucrats entrusted with the implementation of their failed policies. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the body responsible for Australia’s education standards, as well as the National Curriculum.

As I write this report, students across Australia in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are sitting NAPLAN tests. ACARA argues that the test are based on “rigorous national standards”. If only that were true.

This body acts with complete surprise at Australia’s declining education standards, which has been happening steadily over a number of years, under its watch.

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<sup>3</sup> *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, March 2018, Commonwealth of Australia, <<https://www.education.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/through-growth-achievement-report-review-achieve-educational-excellence-australian-schools>>. See also:

[https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary\\_business/committees/senate/school\\_funding/school\\_funding/report/a03](https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/senate/school_funding/school_funding/report/a03)

<sup>4</sup> ‘Australian students rank 21st of 37 listed countries’, Sky News Australia, 28 February 2023, <<https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/australian-students-rank-21st-of-37-listed-countries/video/e456dbcf03653df52fb77bbe41112e6e>>

The OECD's PISA program (Program for International Students Assessment) measures the ability of 15-year-olds across 78 countries to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge to meet real life challenges. This international assessment is undertaken every three years, and the most recent results available are from 2018.

The PISA results clearly show an alarming decline in the performance of Australian students.

Since 2003, Australian students have dropped from:

- 11<sup>th</sup> place in maths to 29<sup>th</sup>;
- 8<sup>th</sup> place in science to 15<sup>th</sup>;
- 4<sup>th</sup> place in literacy to 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear, then, that our education system is failing to deliver even the basic learning outcomes our children deserve. This is despite, as Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) research shows that in Victoria for example, since 2014, spending on education has increased by 30 per cent, yet critical reading and numeracy results have not increased in a commensurate manner.<sup>6</sup> It is the same story in every state and territory across the country.

The alarming decline in Australian educational standards was confirmed in November 2022, when ACARA released the 2022 NAPLAN comparative national results.

NAPLAN as a measure may not be exhaustive, but it does measure the core skills in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation and numeracy. It provides parents of years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students with an independent and objective measure of whether or not their child is grasping *the basics*.

Colleen Harkin of the IPA analysed the NAPLAN results and it is clear that Australian students are not grasping the basics needed for higher learning.<sup>7</sup> I can attest to this depressing phenomenon as one who has worked in tertiary education for over 13 years.

In Harkin's analysis, it seems year 3 students did extremely well, despite the Covid lockdowns. In fact, one may well say that the enforced home schooling meant that teachers and parents had to focus on the things that really matter. As Harkin stated, due to lockdowns, teachers and parents decided to focus on fewer areas, and greater attention was placed on ensuring the core foundational skills were covered. In other words, teachers and parents made sure the three R's were the focus – Reading, Writing and 'Rithmetic.

While year 3 results have been positive, the same cannot be said of other cohorts, as Harkin asserts. The reading results for year 9 girls show 18.7 per cent are at or below the minimum standard. Even more troubling, the results for reading skills of year 9 boys are worse with 28 per cent at the minimum or below the national minimum standard (NMS).

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<sup>5</sup> Colleen Harkin 'Cut the Fat in the Curriculum', 17 November 2022, <<https://ipa.org.au/ipa-today/cut-the-fat-in-the-curriculum>>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



This means that over a quarter of year 9 boys are either below the NMS, or just meeting it. Shockingly, almost one in eight year 9 boys do not meet the NMS for reading.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare sought to dismiss these worrying results at the time by saying: 'it's not clear whether that's Covid but I would suspect it's a big part of it'.

However, as Harkin points out, if Covid was indeed the culprit for the concerning reading results, one would expect to see similar results across the other areas tested. However, as she demonstrates, the numeracy results of 2022 year 9 students have remained consistent through their school life – 95.5 per cent being at or above NMS in year 3, 95.8 per cent in year 5 and 95 per cent in year 9. Previous year 9 cohorts show similar consistent results.

Even so, if we follow the reading results of the same group of students, we see a path of steady, disturbing decline.

The data proves that for every cohort, the standard of achievement remains stable in maths but declines significantly in reading by the time students reach year 9.

What is clear is that Covid is definitely not responsible for the drop in reading skills, as Minister Clare would have us believe. The declining trend in reading results predate Covid – as the PISA program statistics I referred to above bear out.

### **The National Curriculum and falling standards**

Another factor in falling educational standards is the National Curriculum. Much has been written on this subject in various outlets, so I do not propose to go into detail on this subject, save to make some observations that will serve to highlight that change is necessary.

The National Curriculum's priorities have been askew for far too long, and the latest iteration is even worse. As Bella D'Abrera wrote in the *Australian* on 11 May 2022:

What the national curriculum authority has produced is a political document infused with a pagan-green ideology.

Throughout the new prep to year 6 curriculum, the under-12s are continuously encouraged to think about themselves in terms of how they relate to the environment, as well as through the lens of First Nations Australians. In geography, children repeatedly are told they must care for places that are inextricably tied to their identity. What is more, First Nations Australians consistently are held up as role models when it comes to the environment.

Children are being taught it is better to be an Indigenous Australian than any other type of Australian. This is consistent with the teaching of Australia's history.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bella D'Abrera, 'New curriculum, same old leftist ideological bent', *The Australian*, 11 May 2022, <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/new-curriculum-same-old-leftist-ideological-bent/news-story/db102844486519d01ae64d2522e2b843>>

It only gets worse.

Version 9 of the National Curriculum, which was rolled out this year by ACARA, shows how year upon year and subject upon subject, the same message is drilled into our children – Australia’s history is one continuous tale of dispossession, oppression, and genocide of Indigenous Australians, and our material prosperity is based on the abuse of the environment.<sup>9</sup>

(ACARA) is now irreversibly stacked with utopian activists who know that in order to change the world, you have to change what children are taught.

What is currently being unleashed in classrooms across this country is about as far away from a traditional curriculum as you can possibly get. Rather, it is an anarcho-political manifesto which seeks to dismantle the entire edifice of the modern state of Australia by undermining its values and institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Children taught according to the dictates of this curriculum will finish school with a set of beliefs, a worldview and a sense of what it means to be Australian that are at odds with those which have previously been passed on to generations of Australians.

When this is added together with the ‘whole language’ approach to reading that has been widely implemented throughout Australian primary schools, it is clear who is to blame for Australia’s falling education standards.

The OECD Education and Skills Director Andreas Scheicher says: ‘A crowded curriculum equates to burnt out teachers and a weak education system’. The need, as he points out, is to teach fewer things at greater depth and with greater curriculum integrity.

Indeed, teachers are overwhelmed by unsustainable demands around quite unnecessary administration and documentation. These include anecdotal notes every week on every child for every subject, as well as individual conferences with every child in every subject every two weeks. Any incident must be documented, including minor matters like ‘calling out’, with the expectation that the teacher contact parents to discuss matters before it is brought home by the child. And this is before they get to the genuinely important tasks of lesson planning and actual teaching! Little wonder that the cost of education is soaring at the very time academic standards decline.<sup>11</sup>

Given the clear link that has been established between poor school results and unemployment,<sup>12</sup> it is advice ACARA would be well-advised to heed, for the sake of our children and their future.

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<sup>9</sup> Bella D’Abrera, ‘Failing Our Students With A Failed Curriculum’, 23 March 2023, <<https://ipa.org.au/ipa-today/failing-our-students-with-a-failed-curriculum>>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Colleen Harkin, ‘Let Teachers Teach’ 31 March 2023, <<https://ipa.ipa.org.au/ipa-today/let-teachers-teach>>

<sup>12</sup> Natasha Bitá, ‘Year 9 English marks critical to future job prospects in Australia’, *The Australian*, 13 September 2022, <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/year-9-english-marks-critical-to-future-job-prospects-in-australia/news-story/d37f2f5567cb7f3d219f0c3e0f472a8d>>

Yet ACARA is determined to continue, if not double-down, on the same failed policies. Summative assessment, where students are marked for example out of 10 or with letter grades A to E (or F), thus giving parents a definitive idea where their child stands, has been dispensed with in NAPLAN. Instead, a four-band approach has been adopted whereby students' results will be assessed as one of "Exceeding/Strong/Developing/Needs additional support". With descriptive assessments like these, it is impossible to understand and pinpoint a child's performance when ranked against other students in the class or year level, and the standard necessary to succeed.<sup>13</sup>

The justification for this dumbing-down is that competitive tests and examinations reinforce disadvantage and inequality since some students do better than others. *Quelle surprise!*

As ACU Senior Research Fellow Dr Kevin Donnelly wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, one reason students in countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Estonia and Finland perform so well in international tests, compared to Australian students, is because they face more challenging and rigorous academic standards.

The results for school students are clear in comparison. Australia used to compare favourably to Singapore. The last twenty years, however, have seen Singapore's standards going up, while Australia's have gone down. Former Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge noted that, "We have lost the equivalent of a year's worth of learning" and that the "average 15-year-old Singaporean school student is now three years ahead of the average 15-year-old Australian in mathematics and 18 months ahead in reading and science."<sup>14</sup>

### **Teacher training and falling standards**

Another aspect that cannot be ignored is teacher training and quality.

Matthew Ogilvie has given this aspect detailed attention in his report, so I will again limit myself to make some important observations as far as they relate to falling educational standards in schools.

Matthew Bach, the Victorian Shadow Minister for Education (and himself a former teacher) wrote in the *Spectator Australia* on 7 March 2023 that the Productivity Commission has recently thrown down the gauntlet on teacher quality.<sup>15</sup>

Its report into Australia's education system found the largest single factor in student success, and their ability to go on and make a meaningful economic contribution, is teacher quality.

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<sup>13</sup> Kevin Donnelly, 'No sign of improvement despite big investment', *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 2023.

<sup>14</sup> <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/reverse-decline-school-standards-focus-teacher-training>

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Bach, 'The Left's aversion to teacher quality is harming our kids', *Spectator Australia*, 7 March 2023, <<https://www.spectator.com.au/2023/03/the-lefts-aversion-to-teacher-quality-is-harming-our-kids/>>. See also: 'Left's shrill 'ideological objection' to standardised school testing at odds with giving Australian kids a fair go', Sky News Australia, 21 March 2023, ><https://www.skynews.com.au/insights-and-analysis/lefts-shrill-ideological-objection-to-standardised-school-testing-at-odds-with-giving-australian-kids-a-fair-go/news-story/e6e806f1a6f101124697184386d787c0>>

Bach wrote that our students have never performed worse in the crucial areas of literacy, numeracy, and science – at least not since the PISA commenced publishing its reports in 2000.

According to Bach, the commission determined that students taught by above-average teachers will earn almost \$500,000 more over their lifetimes than those taught by average teachers. Not exactly loose change. So, we need to have an overdue and difficult conversation about teacher quality.

One in 10 new teachers cannot meet the necessary standard in critical learning areas like numeracy and literacy. Moves are afoot to change this, with a Teacher Education Expert Panel reporting on 22 March that ATAR scores required for admission to teaching degrees must be lifted, and urging that funding be tied to educational outcomes.

Bach also calls for regular and rigorous teacher appraisals.

These involve regular lesson observations by a school leader and targeted feedback; student surveys about teacher performance; professional development informed by a mentor; and goal setting with ongoing reviews to assess progress. The better teachers will be affirmed, while those who need assistance will be supported to get better, or find a job that better fits their skills.

### **What can be done to effect change? Proposals for the future**

It may be easy to think that change is too difficult to effect, that any attempt to make improvements is doomed to failure. However, doing nothing will ensure failure.

The fact is that failure is not a viable option. The alternative to success should be unthinkable.

As the IPA's Daniel Wild wrote in *Essays for Australia*, Volume 1, 2021:

There will always be those among us who protest that it is now too late, that so much has been lost, and that any attempt at recovery is futile. But it is not, and never will be, too late. Even when it feels like it is too late, the only sensible thing to do is to act and behave as if it isn't. Doing what needs to be done to help save Australia does not guarantee success. But doing nothing guarantees failure. If we try, we know that, at least within some local domains, things will improve.

History is not an externally deterministic process. It is a product of human agency, and application of free will of those who care the most.<sup>16</sup>

We already have clear examples showing us what can be achieved when everyday people decide they are going to do something. It should be no surprise that when everyday people use democracy to express their rejection of elites and their values, those elites then decry 'populism'. 'Populism' is simply the pejorative term elites use to describe democracy.

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Wild, 'What's Happening to Australia', *Essays for Australia*, Volume 1, 2021, 20.

Responsibility also rests with parents to stand up and demand a better and more rigorous education for our children.

Dr Glenn Savage, a researcher in education at the University of Western Australia, has stated that: “Education debates can win elections but they can also be the nail in the coffin for governments.”<sup>17</sup>

The fact that education can be political has been seen in the United States of America. One only has to look at the gubernatorial election results last year in Virginia (where a Democrat governor was unseated) and New Jersey (where another Democrat governor was almost unseated – unthinkable for such a hitherto solid Democrat state) where a major election issue was the education system and, in particular, the fact that kids are being indoctrinated rather than educated.

The success of leaders in the United States such as Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida should be no surprise. Florida is a state of immigrants with new arrivals as a share of its population at nearly double the rate the country as a whole. Immigrants, without the privilege of the native-born, know how important education is. This is also the case in Australia, where there is much evidence to suggest that migrant students perform better in competitive tests than the Australian-born counterparts, as Dr Donnelly recently attested.

“One of the reasons is the respect for learning, that Confucian work ethic, another is parents wanting ... high expectations for their children and the other ... is peer group pressure,” he said.<sup>18</sup>

In a recent article in the *Washington Examiner*, journalist Kaylee McGee White explained the significance of the election results on school boards in Florida. Beneath these results lies a more grassroots movement to ‘Take back the school boards’.

Local elections are extremely important insofar as their results are the most likely to affect your day-to-day life directly. But they’re also the elections with the lowest voter turnout rates and the least amount of media buzz, which suggests the public simply doesn’t care about them as much as they should.

There’s reason to believe, however, that this is changing. In Florida this week, voters flipped dozens of local school board seats, electing conservative candidates supported by Gov. Ron DeSantis. Normally, school board elections are boring afterthoughts. But the turnover across Florida is a sign that voters, especially parents, realize that taking back local politics is the best and easiest way to ensure that your values will be respected and your way of life upheld.

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<sup>17</sup> Above n 1.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Migrant children bring ‘respect for learning’ leading to higher academic results’, Sky News Australia, 24 February 2023, <<https://www.skynews.com.au/opinion/rita-panahi/migrant-children-bring-respect-for-learning-leading-to-higher-academic-results/video/d83ceb635d08a754e940bfada7f1fb25>>

DeSantis seems to understand the cultural moment better than any other Republican politician. He recognizes that issues such as critical race theory, gender ideology, and a failing public education system that has embraced both aren't partisan issues — they're human ones. And he's able to mobilize voters across the political spectrum — several of the school board seats flipped this week were in liberal Florida counties, such as Miami-Dade — as a result.

In short, local elections matter. But so do the cultural issues that drive voters to the polls in the first place. There's a lesson for Republicans in this: Lean into the culture war because the voters are on your side.<sup>19</sup>

It's a lesson the Liberal Party would be well advised to heed!

Now obviously in Australia we do not vote for school boards, but that does not mean we cannot speak up about things like this. It does not mean we have to resign ourselves to the way things are. If migrants like my parents resigned themselves, deciding that it was all too hard and giving up on Australia, where would this country be today?

The apathy displayed for local elections, and political matters generally, is a symptom of the "She'll be right mate" attitude, but it is an attitude that this country can no longer afford, especially when it comes to education. There are encouraging signs of change. Last year the father of an eight year-old daughter was interviewed on Perth radio.<sup>20</sup> The daughter had been colouring posters at school that carried slogans such as 'No Pride in Genocide' and "Stop the Lies!" He said: "I was quite shocked to read slogans like 'No pride in genocide'. A word like genocide to an eight-year-old doing a colouring-in competition just boggles my mind."

At the moment, some important steps have been made by Champion College and Alphacrucis College, however, there is the impression that the focus is too narrow from a denominational point of view. On the other hand, these institutions provide a solid base from which to build a broader, fully privately-funded classical liberal arts college.

Being fully privately funded is essential, in my view. The consequences of government funding are being seen not just in declining education standards, but also in a more sinister way, for example, in the secular assault on Christian educational institutions. As I wrote in *Quadrant* on 24 July 2022:<sup>21</sup>

Christian schools might be in a much stronger position to argue against governments imposing radical Marxist social policy in their establishments if they were not so dependent on government funding. If you are going to take the devil's money, you

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<sup>19</sup> Kaylee McGee White, 'Taking back the school boards, *Washington Examiner*', 25 August 2022, <<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/community-family/taking-back-the-school-boards>>.

<sup>20</sup> See: 'Parents of Eastern Suburbs school concerned over divisive propaganda', *Mornings with Liam Bartlett*, 6PR Radio, 29 July 2022, <<https://www.6pr.com.au/parents-of-eastern-suburbs-school-concerned-over-divisive-propaganda/>>.

<sup>21</sup> **Rocco Loiacono, 'A Church Being Eaten Out From Within', *Quadrant*, 24 July 2022, <<https://quadrant.org.au/opinion/religion/2022/07/a-church-being-eaten-out-from-within/>>**

are sooner or later going to have to dance to his tune. And why would these managerial assimilators bite the hand that feeds them?

St Mary of the Cross, better known to most Australians as Mary MacKillop, steadfastly refused to accept government funding for her schools for the reasons Archbishop Polding of Sydney expressed prophetically in 1859:

*We must not have the National (state) System for our children (because though) they must learn reading, writing and arithmetic and history and whatever else may be thought desirable, they must learn as Roman Catholic children learning these things, and this they cannot do unless they are constantly breathing the atmosphere of their religion.*<sup>22</sup>

The theme of the schools being able to maintain their character and ethos, without government interference, is critical. Part of the justification for state and territory governments reforming anti-discrimination law is that religious schools are funded by government. As reported in the *Spectator Australia* on 29 October 2022, the President of the NT Teachers Union had this to say on removing religious freedom exemptions from anti-discrimination laws:<sup>23</sup>

The Teachers Union representative declared – with a clear tone of contempt:

*‘Practices in faith-based schools, and indeed in any endeavour conducted for the public by faith-based organisations, should reflect community standards and expectations – especially when such organisations are in receipt of public funds.’*

What is more, as Jordan Baker wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year on the tenth anniversary of the first Gonski report:

The Catholic and independent sectors fight hard for their own interests, particularly when it comes to funding, and can galvanise the voting power of their parents in a way government schools cannot.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the priority has shifted from ensuring educational outcomes to ensuring funding outcomes. This has had a deleterious effect on Australia’s education outcomes.

The prescription I am proposing for the illness ailing the Australian education system is one that has been tried before, in the country and elsewhere, with success. It reminds me of a statement US President Ronald Reagan made in his inaugural address on 20 January 1981:

“Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem!”

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<sup>22</sup> Sr Marie Therese Foale RSJ, ‘Background to the Foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph & the Establishment of the Woods/MacKillop System of Catholic Education’, <[https://www.sosj.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/000441\\_ffda.pdf](https://www.sosj.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/000441_ffda.pdf)>

<sup>23</sup> Rod Lampard, ‘Northern Territory is set to abolish religious freedom’, *Spectator Australia*, 29 October 2022, <<https://www.spectator.com.au/2022/10/northern-territory-is-set-to-abolish-religious-freedom/>>

<sup>24</sup> Above n 1.

In other words, like-minded private individuals, be they parents, educators or corporate organisations, concerned about that poor quality of education in this country, should band together to arrest this slide.

I mentioned above how the Catholic Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century felt it imperative not to accept government funding for its schools in order for them to preserve their character. In the 1860s in Australia, with very limited resources, the Catholic Church founded an independent school system for its faithful, many of whom were on low incomes. It was a daring and radical move. It succeeded because the Bishop of Adelaide at the time, Patrick Geoghegan, had fired the enthusiasm of his priests and people. Then, once it had begun, this movement towards a separate system gathered its own momentum and carried on without further pressure from him. To finance the whole project, Geoghegan set up a Central School Fund which was helping support at least fifteen schools by 1863, and their number continued to increase at a steady rate. Geoghegan's successors then asked Mary MacKillop to assist in filling the demand for independent, Catholic schools.

Mary Mackillop's focus was on the basics, whereby she drew up a carefully graded curriculum and timetable based on ensuring students mastered basic literacy and numeracy skills.

In America, we see an example of a very successful, fully privately-funded, classical liberal arts school in Hellenic Classical Charter School in Brooklyn's Park, New York.<sup>25</sup>

As reported in the *City Journal*,<sup>26</sup> Hellenic is a K-8 charter school serving 750 students at two campuses, one in Brooklyn and the other on Staten Island. The local Greek community founded the school in 2005 to offer a classical curriculum. "We created the school to spread Hellenism, highlight the importance of the classics including the study of the Greek and Latin languages, and to educate children about Greek culture and ideas: democracy, science, the arts," said school board chair Charles Capetanakis. Almost 60 percent of the school's diverse student body is low-income.

From the beginning, the school has emphasized proven approaches like phonics instruction and building up the background knowledge that kids need to be proficient readers. As a result, 61 percent of its students passed New York State's English Language Arts and Literacy Standards test in 2022, compared with 47 percent of students statewide.

The report outlines that was too difficult to set up such with the teachers' union and the local education department's bureaucratic web of regulations. Hellenic started as a partnership with the Greek government to bring Greek teachers to the U.S. to teach the language. The school eventually decided that it was preferable to find Greek teachers in America who could better understand the school's pedagogy. This type of experimentation would not have been possible within the district's normal regulations.

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<sup>25</sup> See: <https://www.hccs-nys.org>

<sup>26</sup> Danyela Souza Egorov, 'The Joys and Rigors of A Classical Education', *City Journal*, 17 March 2023, <<https://www.city-journal.org/joys-and-rigors-of-classical-education#.ZBW56GWQMg0.mailto>>



Australia desperately needs more schools like Hellenic, where young people receive a rigorous, classical education and learn to debate ideas respectfully while developing a love for learning.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that increased funding to education has not proved to be the panacea that was promised. Allied with an ideological curriculum, falling standards have become the order of the day.

In order for this decline to be arrested, individuals who are concerned about education and believe it should be grounded firmly in the classical-liberal formation that has served us so well for centuries must be prepared to act to take back control of the education of their children.

In the view of this author, such an outcome will only be possible via a fully-funded private institution that does not rely on any government funding, and thus would be independent of government interference. As I have demonstrated in this report, such an approach has been adopted and has been successful in the past, and it has been adopted and is successful now. There is no reason why this cannot be the case in the future.

Support from all private donors, be they wealthy or not, who value freedom and what Western civilisation has given to us, will be critical in establishing such an institution. It may not guarantee success, but doing nothing means that Australia will slide even further down the world rankings, and we will have failed our children in not doing everything we possibly could to give them the education they deserve. With the right safeguards and mutual understanding between the school and the sponsor/s, the objectives of a high-standard, rigorous, classical education could be realised.

# Teacher Training and the Crisis in Australian Higher Education.

**Author: Professor Matthew Ogilvie**

## Introduction

This report will be highly critical of Australian universities, especially with regard to their neglect of undergraduate education. However, it should not be concluded that the paper includes all universities in this negative assessment. Some Australian universities and colleges perform very well in their core business of education, and this author is proud to serve at one of them, a statement that should serve as a declaration of interest.<sup>27</sup>

This report will first consider teacher education before moving on to the broader crisis in higher education. It will include and build upon material previously published in the *IPA Review*<sup>28</sup> and the *Contributor*.<sup>29</sup>

## Teachers' Classroom Readiness and Failure to Enter the Profession

There is an expectation that teaching graduates should be 'classroom ready,' and that they will be competent and able to teach to the standards expected for Australian students. However, research confirms repeated personal accounts that teaching graduates are not classroom ready. Indeed, research at ECU showed that teaching graduates did not expect to be classroom ready at the end of their degrees.<sup>30</sup> The lack of readiness has obvious implications for schools. Parents are entrusting their children to teachers who, by their own account, lack the confidence and readiness to teach.

In addition to obviously inadequate education standards, teaching graduates have a very high attrition rate.<sup>31</sup> It is estimated that between 10% and 20% of education graduates never become teachers,<sup>32</sup> and it is believed that up to half leave the profession within their first five years.<sup>33</sup> While those figures may be challenged, the Australian Bureau of Statistics

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<sup>27</sup> The author is a Professor at the University of Notre Dame Australia and Deputy Chair of the WA Liberal Party's Policy Subcommittee on Education, Training and Employment. No endorsement by these or any other organisations should be inferred.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Ogilvie, "Let's Cheer for Change," *IPA Review*, Summer 2022 (Online version February 12, 2023). <<https://ipa.org.au/ipa-review-articles/lets-cheer-for-change>>

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Ogilvie, "Higher Education Research Policy and Priorities," *The Contributor*, 5(2021) 24-5. <<http://www.contributor.org.au/fifth-edition/#page/27>>

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, Samantha Jade. (2020). The perceived 'classroom readiness' and support of Western Australian primary graduate teachers. <<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/2314>>

<sup>31</sup> Edwards, The perceived 'classroom readiness' and support of Western Australian primary graduate teachers.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Weldon, "The Teacher Workforce in Australia: Supply, Demand and Data Issues," *Policy Insights*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Issue 2, 2015.

<<https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=policyinsights>> and Melissa Barnes and Russell Cross, "Why we need to review how we test for teacher quality," *The Conversation*, April 23, 2018. <<https://theconversation.com/why-we-need-to-review-how-we-test-for-teacher-quality-95074>>

<sup>33</sup> Chris Summers, "Why I changed careers to teach high school – then quit," *The Age*, August 16, 2022. <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/why-i-changed-careers-to-teach-high-school-then-quit-20220815-p5b9v6.html>> and

suggests that just over half of teaching graduates in Australia do not work in education. Australian Government research in 2014 also revealed that about 20% of teaching graduates fail to register as teachers.<sup>34</sup>

The failure of teaching graduates to be prepared for the classroom has been accompanied by a drop in the number of top-performing students choosing teaching. As [then] Minister Alan Tudge noted, there has been a problem with “the human capital we recruit” into teaching. Singapore “recruits their future teachers exclusively from the top 10% of applicants” and trains them to be “ready to teach.”<sup>35</sup> In Australia, however, the Minister noted that teaching graduates “don’t feel well prepared when they enter the classroom.” It is no coincidence that this failure to prepare has been accompanied at many education faculties by a steady stream of “dogma and teaching fads, at the expense of evidence-based practices.” Moreover, over the past fifteen years, “the number of top performing students entering teaching has declined by a third.”<sup>36</sup>

The results for Australian school students are clear. In days past, Australian education compared well to Singapore. The last two decades, however, have seen a rise in the education standards in Singapore, while Australia’s standards have gone down. Alan Tudge noted that, “We have lost the equivalent of a year’s worth of learning” and that the “average 15-year-old Singaporean school student is now three years ahead of the average 15-year-old Australian in mathematics and 18 months ahead in reading and science.”<sup>37</sup>

## Reform

The comparison with Singapore shows the clear need for reform of teacher training. The current Federal Education Minister, Jason Clare, has committed to a serious review of the content and methods of teaching degrees in order to boost the number of teaching graduates.<sup>38</sup> While his intentions are laudable, the Minister has failed to address the substantial issues in teacher education and recruitment. They include the dogmatic ideologies, to which Alan Tudge referred as the basic issues. It is unreasonable to expect high-quality teacher graduates to emerge from the ranks of lower-performing students after an education that is full of fads and ideologies.

## Standards of Teacher Education

Concerns about the standards of teacher education are illustrated in the results for the “Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students” (LANTITE).<sup>39</sup> LANTITE

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Sarah Marsh, “Five top reasons people become teachers – and why they quit,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/jan/27/five-top-reasons-teachers-join-and-quit>>

<sup>34</sup> Gabrielle Stroud, “Why do teachers leave?” *ABC*, February 4, 2017. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-04/why-do-teachers-leave/8234054>>

<sup>35</sup> Hon Alan Tudge, “To reverse decline in school standards, focus on teacher training,” Op Ed, Minister’s Media Centre, June 22, 2021. <<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/reverse-decline-school-standards-focus-teacher-training>>

<sup>36</sup> Tudge, “To reverse decline in school standards, focus on teacher training.”

<sup>37</sup> Tudge, “To reverse decline in school standards, focus on teacher training.”

<sup>38</sup> Natasha Bitá and Sarah Ison, School reforms: teacher trap to end brain drain, “*The Australian*,” August 12, 2022. <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/school-reforms-teacher-trap-to-end-brain-drain/news-story/83788d259ec4872b3e518c8d6d81ba5b>>

<sup>39</sup> ACER, “The Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students,” 2023. <<https://teacheredtest.acer.edu.au/>>

reflects the expectation that professional teachers should have minimum standards of literacy and numeracy, and that these standards should place them in the top 30% of the Australian population.<sup>40</sup>

At one level, it is of concern that about 10% of would-be teachers are failing LANTITE.<sup>41</sup> On a deeper level, though, it is scandalous that the test is needed in the first place. One must wonder about university education when a student can enter university and then pursue years of university studies without reaching an appropriate level of numeracy and literacy.

The data on LANTITE shows that about 10% of prospective teachers fail the test and that the fail rate has been increasing.<sup>42</sup> But those raw statistics conceal the fact that those failures can come after multiple attempts at the test. “Some 84 per cent of students meet both the standards on their first attempt at the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students or LANTITE, while 11 per cent meet one of the standards and 5 per cent meet neither.”<sup>43</sup>

Thus, while a report prepared for the Department of Education said that “we can expect that, ultimately, 91 per cent of students meet both standards” of literacy and numeracy, those standards may be reached by up to five possible attempts.<sup>44</sup>

### Low Entry Standards

A 2020 internal government report, retrieved by the *Sydney Morning Herald* under freedom of information, confirmed the high number of education students failing LANTITE and “pointed to a correlation between ATAR entry scores and passing the LANTITE.” The report claimed that the correlation was “weak.”<sup>45</sup> However, the correlation does seem stronger than admitted. The report itself admits that of “the 18 [higher education providers] with an advertised ATAR of 70, the rates of ITE students meeting the standards range from 58 per cent to 94 per cent.” Moreover, as will be pointed out below, there is a correlation in many fields of study between student success (or otherwise) and their ATAR results.<sup>46</sup>

The ATAR is a measure of student performance given when they have completed in year 12. On a scale of 100, the average ATAR is 70 (in Queensland students are ranked with an OP score). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of education

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<sup>40</sup> Matthew Knott, “A total shambles’: new literacy and numeracy test for teachers frustrates students, educators,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 1, 2016. <<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/a-total-shambles-new-literacy-and-numeracy-test-for-teachers-frustrates-students-educators-20160901-gr6hi7.html>>

<sup>41</sup> Christiane Barro, “More teachers failing maths and English test. But not everyone got a fair go,” *The New Daily*, July 22, 2020. <<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/2020/07/22/student-teacher-test-graduation/>>

<sup>42</sup> Barro, “More teachers failing maths and English test.”

<sup>43</sup> Jordan Baker, “One in 10 trainee teachers fails required literacy and numeracy tests,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September, 2020. <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/one-in-10-trainee-teachers-fails-required-literacy-and-numeracy-tests-20200925-p55zaj.html>>

<sup>44</sup> Jordan Baker, “One in 10 trainee teachers fails required literacy and numeracy tests.”

<sup>45</sup> Wade Zaglas, “Controversial LANTITE test needs to change, report concludes,” *Education Review*, September 2029, 2020. <<https://www.educationreview.com.au/2020/09/controversial-lantite-test-needs-to-change-report-concludes/>>

<sup>46</sup> Zaglas, “Controversial LANTITE test needs to change,” and Baker, “One in 10 trainee teachers fails required literacy and numeracy tests.”

students at university whose ATAR scores were less than the average of 70. In 2006 25% of teaching students had scored less than 70. By 2015 it was 42%.<sup>47</sup>

A report, which Australian universities tried to suppress, showed that in 2015, “There were 28 offers [of places in teaching degrees] made to students scoring an ATAR of 0-19, 29 offers to those scoring 20-29, and 73 offers to students with an ATAR of 30-39.”<sup>48</sup> The ABC reported that acceptance of low-ATAR students continued. In 2018, “The Federation University of Australia's lowest reported ATAR was 22, for Southern Cross University it was 35, and 36 for the Australian Catholic University (ACU).” The reasons for admitting low achieving students are disputed. Some university representatives argue that equity and “extenuating circumstances” account for such offers.<sup>49</sup> However, the *Sydney Morning Herald* argued that the universities are motivated by income streams rather than any desire to train future teachers.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of which position is correct, it remains that there is a trend of Australian universities taking on low-achieving students into their teacher training degrees.

It would be understandable if such students went on to complete degrees and find gainful employment. However, the opposite is true. Education degrees have the second highest dropout rates in Australia. There is also a clear correlation between low ATAR admissions and dropout rates. “[U]niversity data provided to the Federal Education Department shows that universities that admit students with low ATARs suffer some of the highest drop-out rates.”<sup>51</sup>

It should be noted that education degrees are not the only ones affected by low admissions standards. *The Australian* reported that, in 2022, “Universities made offers to students with Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores below 50 – the bottom 10 per cent of high school leavers – for 221 different bachelor degrees.”<sup>52</sup>

Data from the Federal Education Department reveal that in 2021, over 7,000 students with sub-50 ATAR scores were accepted into Australian universities. With poor academic preparation for university studies, about half of those students were expected to fail to complete their degrees.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Julie Doyle, “Teaching students' high school marks are dropping, but universities say it doesn't matter,” *ABC*, 2 November, 2017. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-02/are-our-teachers-smart-enough-to-teach-our-kids/9102674>>

<sup>48</sup> Natasha Robinson, “Students with lowest ATAR scores being offered places in teaching degrees: secret report,” *ABC*, 18 September, 2018. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-18/students-lowest-atar-scores-teaching-degree-offers-secret-report/10200666>>

<sup>49</sup> Natasha Robinson, “Students with lowest ATAR scores being offered places in teaching degrees.”

<sup>50</sup> Rob Stokes, “How universities lower teacher standards by focusing on profit,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September, 2018. <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/how-universities-lower-teacher-standards-by-focusing-on-profit-20180920-p504xg.html>>

<sup>51</sup> Natasha Bitá, “Hard lesson for dropout university teacher degrees,” *The Australian*, August 20, 2022. <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/hard-lesson-for-dropout-university-teacher-degrees/news-story/2f47e3b9077310ca9a60bdfc3e1f27b5>>

<sup>52</sup> Natasha Bitá, “Universities set low bar to take subpar students,” *The Australian*, August 5, 2022. <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/universities-set-low-bar-to-take-subpar-students/news-story/9691c2f2b30d15c2d783802156705ab4>>

<sup>53</sup> Bitá, “Universities set low bar to take subpar students.”

It would seem that the problems of low entry standards relate to the uncapping of university places initiated by Julia Gillard, which saw domestic undergraduate numbers rise by 45% between 2008 and 2017, with an inevitable dilution of the talent pool. Admitting such under-prepared students not only compromises the effectiveness of education, it also seems dreadfully unfair to these students. Given the correlation between low ATARs and dropout rates, such students would be better placed in training elsewhere, where they would probably find much better job prospects. Professor Andrew Norton of ANU noted that these students enter university with “what looks like poor academic preparation” and are put at considerable financial risk because they still have to pay their fees, even if they fail.<sup>54</sup> The problem will probably get worse because the new Labor government has committed to 20,000 more places at universities<sup>55</sup> but it has shown no substantial plan to fix the underlying problems facing Australian higher education.<sup>56</sup>

The paper will turn now from a focus on teacher education to dealing with higher education in general.

### **Reprioritising Teaching & Neglect of Core Mission**

The 2022-2023 budget allocated at least \$20 billion of taxpayer money to universities.<sup>57</sup> Most taxpayers would expect that this money would be spent mostly on the high-quality education of Australian students. However, when he was Minister for Education, Alan Tudge suggested that this was not the highest priority of Australian universities. He said that “Our public universities were initially established for one purpose: to educate Australians,” but that “I have had almost every Vice-Chancellor talk to me about research and international students, but not many talk to me about their ambitions for Australian students.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Low Teaching standards**

The then-minister’s words reflect the belief that university teaching standards are falling, especially for undergraduates. The recent COVID pandemic and the switch to online education prompted many questions about teaching standards. But they have clearly been in decline for many years.

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<sup>54</sup> Bitá, “Universities set low bar to take subpar students.”

<sup>55</sup> Australian Labor Party, “Fee Free TAFE and more Uni Places: Labor's Future Made in Australia Skills Plan.” <<https://www.alp.org.au/policies/fee-free-tafe-and-more-university-places>>

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Norton, “Labor offers extra university places, but more radical change is needed,” *The Conversation*, December 6, 2021. <<https://theconversation.com/labor-offers-extra-university-places-but-more-radical-change-is-needed-173219>>

<sup>57</sup> Department of Education and Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, “Budget 2022-2023.” <<https://www.dese.gov.au/about-us/corporate-reporting/budget/2022-23-budget#:~:text=Australian%20schools%20continue%20to%20receive,the%20period%202018%20to%202029.>>

<sup>58</sup> Hon Alan Tudge, “Our priorities for strengthening Australia’s universities,” Speech by the Federal Minister for Education, June 3, 2021. <<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/our-priorities-strengthening-australias-universities> .>

In 2015, the *Four Corners* program “Degrees of Deception” highlighted problems with higher education standards.<sup>59</sup> The program told the story of a lecturer who, after detecting “serious plagiarism” in an ethics assignment (the irony!) and failing three dozen students, was given clear instructions to pass them. Despite their serious academic and ethical breaches, most of them were soon after registered as graduate nurses. *Four Corners* also referred to a nurse, recently graduated, who gave dishwashing liquid to a patient instead of their medicine. It turned out that the student was incapable of reading the bottle’s label. Even though the nurse failed English language tests six times after graduation, the university incredibly defended the high standards of its nursing program.

## Cheating

The crisis in higher education is reflected in widespread cheating, which can flourish in an environment of low teaching standards. As an indication of the scale of the problem, Pearson Educational, the 177-year-old educational publisher, was overtaken in value in 2020 by Chegg, a subscription service widely used by students for cheating.<sup>60</sup> Chegg gives students access to a bank of answers to textbook questions, and allows them to submit original questions for an expert answer “in as little as 30 minutes.”<sup>61</sup> Students may also access online essay services, which may be either free services or essay factories that provide custom-written essays for a fee.<sup>62</sup>

An article in the *Atlantic* suggested that the growth in online education may be leading to the increase of cheating.<sup>63</sup> Certainly the two have correlated. But it is not only online education that facilitates cheating, but poor-quality education in general. Large impersonal classes with minimal interaction and a lack of educational relationship are a fertile environment for cheating.

## Online Issues

Online education can be, and has been, done well. But the reactionary adoption of online teaching during the COVID 19 pandemic exposed serious flaws in the way that it has often been undertaken. It has become common, for example, for online classes to have so many students that they find it impossible to ask questions or have meaningful engagement. The

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<sup>59</sup> Linton Besser and Kerry O’Brien, “Degrees of Deception,” *Four Corners*, April 20, 2015.

[https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-20/degrees-of-deception-promo/6398568?utm\\_campaign=abc\\_news\\_web&utm\\_content=link&utm\\_medium=content\\_shared&utm\\_source=abc\\_news\\_web](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-20/degrees-of-deception-promo/6398568?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web) >

<sup>60</sup> Tom Braithwaite, “Student cheating is now a multibillion-dollar business,” *Financial Times*, September 27, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/3fcfcf72-4838-49e5-b9ce-a360b5b5ab6b>

<sup>61</sup> Braithwaite, “Student cheating is now a multibillion-dollar business.”

<sup>62</sup> Adam Morton, “Sunday Explainer: The essay factory helping students cheat,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 14, 2014. <https://www.smh.com.au/education/sunday-explainer-the-essay-factory-helping-students-cheat-20141114-11myoy.html>

<sup>63</sup> Derek Newton, “Cheating in Online Classes Is Now Big Business,” *The Atlantic*, November 4, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/11/cheating-through-online-courses/413770/> >

experience was so bad for many students that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) found that “a very large proportion of respondents in the various surveys commented that they did not like the experience of online learning and did not wish to ever experience it again.”<sup>64</sup> TEQSA further found that 34% of students found fault with a “lack of/inadequate academic interaction” and that 29% complained of a “lack of engagement.” Students also noted that online classes were shorter and covered less material than traditional classes, leaving them to do work for themselves that previously would have been done in class. Students reported that their education was “unsettling” and that “they didn’t think they were getting ‘value for money’.” Indeed, their experience has been likened elsewhere to that of “Netflix degrees and robot teachers.”<sup>65</sup>

It should be said that the negative experiences of students expose flaws not only with online but also onsite classes, where lectures are just a monologue of note-reading. A talented lecturer will create classes that engage students. But simply showing students recorded videos or extended monologues makes this impossible, unless they are complemented with interactive formative experiences that are genuinely educational.

The minimal interaction that comes from excessively large classes results in a teaching process that tends away from genuine education and towards indoctrination. That is, large classes only allow students to experience lower order learning in which information is communicated students who receive that information passively. Such students are robbed of higher order learning and the development of academic skills that result from learning actively through questioning, debating, and testing ideas. To put the point in other terms, large classes, whether they are online or onsite, foster passive assimilation of information. Smaller, interactive classes foster active critical thinking.

Alan Tudge noted that online classes with large numbers of students and low contact hours do not meet student (or community) expectations of universities. He thus encouraged “a focus in our universities on how to enhance the classroom and learning experience of Australian students. And this must start with a return to the previous face-to-face learning, where COVID rules allow.”<sup>66</sup>

## Staffing

Apart from what and how universities teach their students is the question of “who teaches?” Many universities direct their senior academic staff into research, while a high proportion of undergraduate teaching is done by less experienced and/or casual staff. Many

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<sup>64</sup> Linley Martin, “Foundations for good practice: The student experience of online learning in Australian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic,” The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), November, 2020. <<https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/student-experience-of-online-learning-in-australian-he-during-covid-19.pdf>>

<sup>65</sup> Aja Styles, “‘Netflix’ degrees and robot teachers: How big tech could shape WA universities,” *WA Today*, June 14, 2021. <<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/netflix-degrees-and-robot-teachers-how-big-tech-could-shape-wa-universities-20210614-p580ze.html>>

<sup>66</sup> Tudge, “Our priorities for strengthening Australia’s universities.”



universities rely on casuals to do the teaching work, which brings in the universities' income, while senior and permanent academics devote themselves to prestigious research.

A study showed that 66% of staff at Victorian universities were casual or fixed-term staff.<sup>67</sup> It has been claimed that “more than 70% of academics at some universities are casuals”<sup>68</sup> and that at some universities, casual staff teach “80% of undergraduate courses.” Those casual staff have sometimes been instructed to do substandard work in order to meet inadequate budgets.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, casual teaching staff have been subject to widespread wage theft.<sup>70</sup> The problem of casual teachers has become so bad that the TEQSA announced an investigation into the impact of casualisation on student learning.<sup>71</sup>

At the same time, there are widespread claims of wage theft,<sup>72</sup> redirection of resources from teaching to research, and cost-cutting that have all impacted on teaching quality. An ABC report revealed that “Tutors at some of Australia's sandstone universities are being told to do a “poor job” and “skim read” student essays to meet impossible marking pay rates.”<sup>73</sup> At one Australian university, students were told that, due to staff underpayment, only some parts of their assignments would be marked.<sup>74</sup>

The effect on teaching quality is obvious, but it is also evident that widespread casualisation can also affect the ideological positions being taught at universities. If we accept that with age and experience comes a worldview that is more conservative or liberal (in the classical liberal sense), we can appreciate how leftist ideas or the latest fads may be more common among casual staff, which are then passed on to their students.

Another issue of university staffing is the administrative bloat that affects the sector. If we look to the United Kingdom as an example that Australia seems to be following, most universities employ more administrative and professional staff than academic staff. Benjamin Ginsburg notes that academic staff are being displaced by “armies of functionaries—the vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, assistant provosts, deans, deanlets, deanlings, each commanding staffers and assistants—who, more and more, direct the operations of

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<sup>67</sup> NTEU, “Issues Paper: The Growth of Insecure Employment in Higher Education,” LAEIC - Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills, Submission no: 20, Attachment 1, Received 13 May 2022.

<<https://new.parliament.vic.gov.au/492ccc/contentassets/1a2129228d874a1db974c1484682896d/attachment-documents/submission-20---attachment-1.pdf>>

<sup>68</sup> Jess Harris, Kathleen Smithers, Nerida Spina, “More than 70% of academics at some universities are casuals. They're losing work and are cut out of JobKeeper” *The Conversation*, May 15, 2020.

<<https://theconversation.com/more-than-70-of-academics-at-some-universities-are-casuals-theyre-losing-work-and-are-cut-out-of-jobkeeper-137778>>

<sup>69</sup> Connor Duffy, “University underpayment so rampant tutors 'instructed to do a poor job' to avoid unpaid hours, former staff say,” *ABC*, August 18, 2020. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-18/rmit-ug-now-among-universities-accused-of-underpaying-staff/12565528>>

<sup>70</sup> Connor Duffy, “University of Melbourne to repay millions to staff after decade-long underpayment practices.” *ABC*, August 5, 2020. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-05/university-of-melbourne-exposed-in-decade-long-wage-theft-case/12519588>>

<sup>71</sup> Duffy, “University underpayment so rampant tutors 'instructed to do a poor job.’”

<sup>72</sup> Andrea Mayes, “Curtin University casual staff in wages theft claim,” *ABC*, September 2, 2022.

<<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-02/curtin-university-casual-staff-in-wages-theft-claim/101395766>>

<sup>73</sup> Duffy, “University underpayment so rampant tutors 'instructed to do a poor job.’”

<sup>74</sup> Duffy, “University underpayment so rampant tutors 'instructed to do a poor job.’”

every school.”<sup>75</sup> This relates to the claim made by Salvatore Babones that universities are not necessarily under-funded, the issue is how those funds are spent.

## Content and Curriculum

If we turn to the content of university education, the IPA’s Dr Bella d’Abrera has done excellent work. History is a good example of the way that most Australian universities have refocused their academic programs on identity politics, or “grievance studies.” Her research showed that only three history programs (University of Notre Dame, Campion College, and Federation University) covered the “Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation.”<sup>76</sup>

Humanities graduates should be expected to possess transferable skills that prepare them for a career as professionals. Those skills should include knowledge and critical thinking skills. Instead of leaving university with such an education, too many graduate with a credential, a sense of grievance and entitlement, and hostility towards Australian culture and values.

It is revealing that curriculum content and standards seem to correlate. The universities that taught authentic history also performed well in teaching quality. The 2018 national Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Graduate Outcomes Survey,<sup>77</sup> ranked Federation University “first in Victoria for undergraduate student support, skill development, teaching quality, overall employment and median salary...”<sup>78</sup> The University of Notre Dame was ranked third in Australia for teaching quality, and second for overall experience. The correlation between teaching quality and content quality seems strong. It is clear that academic fads or baseless ideologies cannot survive rigorous debate where there is high-quality engagement of students who think actively. But fads and ideologies can thrive in large classes where students experience only a passive transfer of ideas.

## Academic Freedom

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<sup>75</sup> Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p2. <<https://academic.oup.com/book/40915/chapter-abstract/349089301?redirectedFrom=fulltext>>

<sup>76</sup> Researcher Profile, “Bella d’Abrera.” Institute of Public Affairs. <<https://ipa.org.au/author/belladabrera>>

<sup>77</sup> QILT, “Graduate Outcomes Survey, 2018.” <[https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-\(gos\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-(gos))>

<sup>78</sup> Federation University, “Annual Report, 2018.” <[https://federation.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/462276/FED-013\\_Annual-Report\\_LR\\_Pages\\_190401.pdf](https://federation.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/462276/FED-013_Annual-Report_LR_Pages_190401.pdf)>

Australian universities have also seen many challenges to academic freedom. For example, we see external pressure from China,<sup>79</sup> including Confucius Institutes,<sup>80</sup> funding of staff in sensitive positions,<sup>81</sup> cancellation of publications,<sup>82</sup> and the persecution of students who oppose communist China.<sup>83</sup> We see internal pressure from political correctness and “woke” ideology. The firing of JCU’s Peter Ridd for violating climate change orthodoxy is a good example. As evidence of how serious the situation is, the Ridd case brought together the Institute of Public Affairs and the National Tertiary Education Union.<sup>84</sup>

We are now in the strange situation, as I claimed in 2021, that one enjoys more academic freedom at a Catholic university in Australia than a public one. That claim remains unchallenged.<sup>85</sup>

### Rankings and Metrics

The crisis in higher education is not entirely the fault of universities. The foundational problem has been with the metrics used to externally evaluate universities, the most influential of which has not been graduate standards but international university rankings. Australian National University vice chancellor Professor Brian Schmidt highlighted the problem, stating that, “Everyone says [rankings] don’t matter, but they do ... They drive students to you, they hold up your prestige in the community and governments. It’s a shame they really aren’t very good.”<sup>86</sup> He even questioned the validity of the global ranking systems, accusing them of misleading students and distorting the research priorities of universities. Schmidt cited Indigenous studies as an example. Investing in research that finds

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<sup>79</sup> Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, “The Chinese Government co-funded at least four University of Queensland courses,” *ABC*, October 15, 2019. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-15/chinese-government-cofunded-four-university-of-queensland-course/11601946>>

Ben Doherty, “University of Technology Sydney staff refuse China’s demand for passport numbers,” *The Guardian*, August 13, 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/13/university-of-technology-sydney-staff-refuse-chinas-demand-for-passport-numbers>>

<sup>80</sup> Lisa Visentin, “China-backed Confucius Institutes face closure under veto laws,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 10, 2021. <<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-backed-confucius-institutes-face-closure-under-veto-laws-20210423-p57lvo.html>>

<sup>81</sup> Troy Shepherd, “University students and staff face increasing threats, foreign interference inquiry finds,” *The Guardian*, March 25, 2022. <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/mar/25/university-students-and-staff-face-increasing-threats-foreign-interference-inquiry-finds>> and

Frank Chung, “Australian universities’ secret ties to China to be investigated,” *News.com.au*, August 31, 2020. <<https://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/australian-economy/australian-universities-secret-ties-to-china-to-be-investigated/news-story/23c0e4bc3776b26f91037ff814be96b8>>

<sup>82</sup> Hai Nan, He Ping, Luisetta Mudie, “Australian Book on China’s ‘Silent Invasion’ Withdrawn At Last Minute Amid Legal Threats,” *Radio Free Asia*, November 13, 2017. <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/book-11132017110421.html>>

<sup>83</sup> Aaron Patrick, “University risks making Drew Pavlou a free speech martyr,” *Financial Review*, May 26, 2020. <<https://www.afr.com/policy/health-and-education/university-risks-making-drew-pavlou-a-free-speech-martyr-20200526-p54wj0>>

<sup>84</sup> Gideon Rozner, “Ridd Case: IPA Welcomes Historic High Court Appeal,” *Institute of Public Affairs*, July 29, 2020. <<https://ipa.org.au/publications-ipa/ridd-case-ipa-welcomes-historic-high-court-appeal>>

<sup>85</sup> Matthew Ogilvie, “Academic Freedom and the Catholic University - A Perspective,” (Video). <<https://youtu.be/zxp0dmsno7I>>

<sup>86</sup> Jordan Baker, “Global rankings are distorting universities’ decisions, says ANU chief,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 11, 2020. <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/global-rankings-are-distorting-universities-decisions-says-anu-chief-20201111-p56do9.html>>

real solutions to Indigenous issues is not regarded as globally prestigious, and can lower a university's rankings.

In addition, research at universities is expected to complement and enhance university teaching. But Schmidt argued that the rankings focus on globally prestigious research and that they "have nothing to do with teaching outcomes right now, and sometimes I think they direct students to the wrong place."<sup>87</sup>

Professor Andrew Norton at ANU supports Schmidt's arguments and claims that rankings have "a distorting effect." Rankings serve to attract international students, and they direct university resources towards the areas favoured by the metrics. This means that research in the sciences is favoured, with research in the humanities and university teaching being neglected.<sup>88</sup>

What has just been said is reflected in the Australian Research Council's metrics for evaluating Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). They actively discourage researchers from researching and solving real-world challenges. Australian scholars find it hard to get research into Australian problems published in globally ranked journals because the research is limited to local issues.

This means that the sort of prestigious research that improves rankings is not directed at community benefit. Instead, it is written with other academics in mind. Even then, this "prestigious research" is read by very few people. For example, it is widely held that the typical prestigious journal article in philosophy is read by less than a dozen people.

These research rankings are also easily manipulated. One technique involves professors agreeing to quote each other's research in order to drive up their citation scores. There was also the notorious example of the University of Alexandria's rapid rise in international rankings after Mohamed El Naschie's publication of 320 of his scientific articles. They happened to be published in a journal of which he was also the editor.<sup>89</sup>

### **Rankings and Research Priorities**

Alan Tudge criticised global rankings for undervaluing community-oriented research and commercialisation. He was concerned that rankings obsession diverts resources away from teaching and from research that directly benefits the community. He said that "nearly all the incentives for an academic are geared towards publishing and that there are few incentives" for focusing research on community benefit.

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<sup>87</sup> Baker, "Global rankings are distorting universities' decisions."

<sup>88</sup> Baker, "Global rankings are distorting universities' decisions."

<sup>89</sup> D. D. Guttenplan, "Questionable Science Behind Academic Rankings," *New York Times*, Nov 14, 2010. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/15/education/15iht-educLede15.html>>

Alan Tudge also observed that Australian universities produce a lot of research, but that research has not been useful enough to the community. He notes that the number of academic papers multiplied fourfold between 2000 and 2020, but “on nearly every measure of research commercialisation, we have barely moved over those same twenty years.”<sup>90</sup>

He thus called for a refocus of university research and called for research that will, “shift the dial, so that in five or ten years’ time, we start to look more like Israel or California or the UK in terms of how our universities interact with business and generate new ideas, new jobs, and new sources of wealth for Australia.”<sup>91</sup> He proposed that creating a “culture of collaboration between universities and industry” would be a better basis for productive research and genuine innovation.<sup>92</sup>

### **China-Friendly Rankings**

The influence of China on Australian universities should not be underestimated. The attractions of funding and international students have made universities sensitive to rankings, especially Chinese rankings. China’s Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) system weights highly cited research published and Nobel Prize winners working at the institutes at 80 per cent. The Chinese Communist Party values prestige and reputation over quality of education and most certainly over independent critical thinking. Thus, it has been claimed that chasing Chinese rankings and their international students, for example, by recruiting highly cited researchers, has led to the neglect of the education of Australian students.<sup>93</sup> That is, by pursuing income from China, universities have shifted their attention from what is good for Australian students to what is demanded by Chinese customers.

This is certainly made clear by Professor Salvatore Babones who argued that Australia’s most prestigious universities have “relied heavily on pulling one specific lever: the recruitment of star academics from a limited global list of [highly cited researchers].”<sup>94</sup>

There is an irony in all of these points. Right now, universities that prioritise teaching are facing a penalty for doing their job well. Despite achieving top results for student experience and for teaching undergraduates – the core business of a university, they are being threatened with demotion from university status because they do not engage in enough of the “ivory tower” research that meets the standards of these artificial world rankings.

## **The Way Forward**

### **Diversity in the Sector**

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<sup>90</sup> Alan Tudge, “Universities and the economy: Suggested priorities for the new Labor Government,” (Speech), July 7, 2022. <<https://www.alantudge.com.au/latest-news/universities-and-the-economy-suggested-priorities-for-the-new-labor-government/>>

<sup>91</sup> Tudge, “Our priorities for strengthening Australia’s universities.”

<sup>92</sup> Tudge, “Our priorities for strengthening Australia’s universities.”

<sup>93</sup> Aja Styles, “Stink from the corpse’: WA universities caught in vicious cycle for rankings, research and revenue,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 17, 2020. <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/stink-from-the-corpse-wa-universities-caught-in-vicious-cycle-for-rankings-research-and-revenue-20201210-p56mhx.html>>

<sup>94</sup> “Stink from the corpse’: WA universities caught in vicious cycle for rankings, research and revenue.”

The current federal oversight of universities discourages diversity in the sector and this prevents clear distinctions being made between universities that perform in their core mission and those that do not. Alan Tudge said that, “we also need to start a conversation about how we can support greater differentiation and specialisation in the university sector.”<sup>95</sup> He is absolutely right. Not every university needs to be the same and, just as with any other industry, the sector would benefit from having specialists in different fields. In addition to greater diversity in the sector, it would be beneficial to have a more level playing field – both for those smaller institutions that contribute to diversity and to new players who might find themselves shut out of the sector right now.

### **Refocus on Education as the Core Business**

To start the renewal of Australian higher education, universities must be refocussed on high quality education as their core mission. Alan Tudge wrote of “a focus in our universities on how to enhance the classroom and learning experience of Australian students.”<sup>96</sup> If those words are followed by positive action, we can hope for a renewal in the core business of universities, which is education. If we turn away from artificial global rankings and refocus on education, we will be better placed with job-ready graduates, whether they have hard skills in technology, or soft-skills such as critical thinking, leadership, effective communication. That focus will emphasise rigorous education and graduates who will share Australian values, including free speech, the pursuit of truth, and pride in our heritage. One would also argue that higher standards of education will also boost the standards of content of what is taught.

With respect to recovering this vision, the States would have an important role to play. Whistleblower Professor Gerd Schröder-Turk reminds us that even though universities are federally-funded, they are established under state legislation. He suggests that the states should exercise due oversight to ensure that universities are meeting their objects and acting in the public interest.<sup>97</sup> Should the States exercise their responsibility. Australian universities could experience their most serious reform in decades.

### **Outward Vision**

Another part of renewing universities is a change of vision. Too many universities have an inward focus, with respect to their institutional survival. It is essential that they instead regain a mission focus and look outwardly so as to be more accountable to their stakeholders: taxpayers, students and their families and Australian businesses and employers. Alan Tudge’s speeches make some positive suggestions in this regard. He called for a paradigm shift in which Australian universities look less inwardly to academia, and more outwardly to the community. He used the example of successful relationships between universities and businesses in Israel, the UK or California. He argued that partnerships between universities and the community would completely refocus university

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<sup>95</sup> Tudge, “Our priorities for strengthening Australia’s universities.”

<sup>96</sup> Tudge, “Our priorities for strengthening Australia’s universities.”

<sup>97</sup> Gerd Schröder-Turk, “Dear Mark McGowan, you wouldn’t ask this of a mining company,” *WA Today*, August 10, 2021. <<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/dear-mark-mcgowan-you-wouldn-t-ask-this-of-a-mining-company-20210810-p58hl6.html>>

research. He thus encouraged a “culture of collaboration between universities and industry” that would foster high-quality research and genuine innovation.<sup>98</sup>

Alan Tudge’s vision would encourage a more robust relationship between universities, businesses, and other stakeholders. This would result in research that will be more rigorous, more relevant, and thus able to deliver better outcomes on the investments made by taxpayers. That vision of stronger external stakeholder relationships, especially with greater accountability to employers, would also improve teaching of students as future employees. From another perspective, stronger stakeholder relationships and the real-life application of scholarship will help to marginalise faddish and ideological teaching, and to keep education focused on truth, high standards, and critical thinking skills.

### **Rankings vs Profession-Ready Graduates**

One would argue that Australian universities should be allowed to reject artificial global rankings. The recent loss of Chinese students should be an opportunity to ditch such rankings and return to education as the core business of universities. By emphasising job-ready graduates, hard and soft skills and higher standards, we can renew higher education as the enterprise of universities. One would also add that graduates should not only be “job ready,” but also profession-ready. That is, universities need to recapture the vision of educating leaders, formed in wisdom and ready for leadership in the professions and the community.

Rejecting the rankings system would also help refocus university research. The ERA currently encourages research that brings prestige among other academics. Positively reformed universities would encourage research that (i) benefits the community and business, and (ii) improves the teaching of lecturers and professors.

### **Models of Who is Doing Well**

It is revealing to look at the institutions that perform well on surveys of student experience. In the latest QILT results, Bond University, University of Notre Dame, Campion College, Avondale College and the University of Divinity all performed well.<sup>99</sup> Beneath the surface of the statistics is the reality that those institutions that perform well in student experience are oriented towards their students, come from a religious heritage, and/or are exist within a long-standing intellectual tradition. One may suggest that there is no need to “reinvent the wheel” but instead to reform Australian universities by looking at what some Australian institutions are doing well.

It should be acknowledged, though, that these institutions are genuinely diverse and they devote themselves utterly to their specific students. That is, they don’t fall upon common standards that foster mediocrity. However, most of these institutions are denominationally-

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<sup>98</sup> Tudge, “Our priorities for strengthening Australia’s universities.”

<sup>99</sup> QILT, “Student Experience Survey,” 2022. <[<https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)>](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses))>

based and thus they cannot engage the broader community. Despite those limits, they show models of how engage in high-quality higher education.

## Conclusion

There is a clear need for university education that:

- Is focussed on high-quality education as its core business.
- That engages in research for the community's good and to improve teaching quality.
- Upholds high standards and academic freedom.
- Prepares students for a life in the professions.
- Spends its resources well, on good teaching and relevant research rather than wasting resources on things like administrative bloat.

There are universities that fulfill these needs right now, though they are under considerable pressure from government policies that push them towards mediocrity, irrelevant research, fads and ideologies, and wastefulness. It is certainly possible that under-performing universities can be reformed, but that is not guaranteed.

What is there to be done? Where the need exists, a new private university, college or centre within a university could be established. While many people believe that a new university would be ideal, the current legislative environment does not allow a level playing field for newcomers. So, it would probably be better to start as a college, then work towards university status in due course. One could also recommend supporting new programs with existing universities, a model we see in the Ramsay Centre's programs in East Coast Universities. One would see such a program working well in a West Coast university, with University of Notre Dame no doubt being the best fit due to its open commitment to liberal arts education.

How should we fund such a new university, college or program? Fully private funding would be the best in order to preserve the independence and distinctiveness of the institution or program.

Being fully privately funded may be preferable, even essential, if an institution was to be properly independent. As an ideal, Hillsdale College, Michigan, has long stood out as providing a successful high-quality liberal arts education while being privately-funded and thus independent of government interference.<sup>100</sup>

However, the cost of such an enterprise would be considerable— at least in the tens of millions of dollars. In this author's opinion, it would be far more cost-effective to fund a liberal arts program or honours college within an existing university. With the right safeguards and mutual understanding between the university and the sponsor/s, the objectives of a high-standard education could be realised.

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<sup>100</sup> Hillsdale College, <<https://www.hillsdale.edu/>>



This paper began by describing the crisis in teacher education and then turned to the broader crisis in Australian higher education. There is a clear need for change. In setting forth a path for change, some very good work has been done already, especially by the former Minister for Education, Alan Tudge. Whether in new or existing institutions or programs, it would be wise to take up his call for universities and colleges to return to the core business of education and to engage in research that benefits students and the community.

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