

## THE POLITICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION – Summary of key points to USAP, What should Universities be? 22/11/18

As politics has become increasingly a short-term, opportunistic, populous, and mostly negative “game”, focused on point scoring and blame shifting, over the last couple of decades, higher education has become something of a “political football”, especially as the government’s budgetary position has fluctuated.

Often, as in the 1<sup>st</sup> Abbott Government Budget in 2013, changes in the funding of universities has just been “dropped on the sector”, without any, or adequate consultation - the then Minister, Pyne, was warned by senior staff about the likely sector and community reaction but was “unconcerned”, welcoming the publicity to be generated by the “fight”.

This politicisation has had a significant consequences on funding, at time favouring foreign over domestic students/HECS students, encouraging universities to “steal” from their education budgets in funding research, etc.

Also, complicated by overlapping Federal/State relations and responsibilities. A key element of Federation reform should be to clearly allocate responsibility to one level of government.

There are also probably too many universities for a country the size of Australia – some of the expansion in numbers over the years has resulted in a lowering of standards, impacting on domestic and international standing – and yet there is also insufficient specialization in academic fields by university – too much of a desire to offer the widest range of courses at all universities. A process of rationalization and consolidation/merger is probably inevitable.

Process has also resulted in too much bureaucracy in university administration, and some compromising of the essential balance between independent/creative thinking and research, on the one hand, and the development of “degree supermarkets”, on the other. There has also been a significant neglect of the significance of “engagement” (stemming mostly from remuneration and advancement being driven mostly by publications) to the detriment of the development and implementation of “good” public policy, and therefore government.

There is an urgent need to depoliticize higher education perhaps by establishing an independent, Higher Education Commission, to take key issues out of day-to-day politics.

It would also be important for the sector to drive a process of longer-term strategic thinking, perhaps initially undertaking a “blank sheet of paper” exercise to consider what the sector would like/expect higher education to be in say 2030, and then to consider “pathways”/scenarios to get there.

It is also worth thinking more about the consequences of technology for teaching and research – online vs face-to-face. Perhaps universities have been “overbuilt”.

Considerable funding could be released by “selling” university buildings into a specialized property fund/trust, leasing back the space.

Many universities are “State” owned yet seen little return of state payroll and other taxes paid.