

## Benefits of a crisis

COVID-19 has precipitated a crisis that had been in the making for years. It has revealed important failings of the Australian higher education system such as its phenomenal dependence on foreign money. It has brought out in utmost clarity that universities must do more to make their role and importance understood by government. Furthermore, this crisis is revealing monstrosities the past system has created and that are now developing their full impact. However, there is also an opportunity for a fresh start. A crisis can have cleansing and healthy effects.

Students and their teachers, professors in particular, are the core of every university. However, because senior academics have allowed it to happen, managers now equate themselves with “The University”. This is misleading for politicians, the media and the general public. In a sense, universities have become *inverted*, as a colleague recently put it.

There is a need for management at every university, but this management must serve to support the mission of research and teaching which are inseparable because cutting edge teaching requires teaching by researchers who work at the cutting edge. The idea to separate what is inseparable can only be born in the mind of people who have not understood either one.

Most successful academics will not be interested in anything other than their academic work so management cannot be their priority. However, credible academics are now needed as university managers because they know best what is required. Good academics must take on more responsibilities and replace a defunct system ruled by one of the lowest quality motivations: money.

If this change does not happen, ever more so-called strategic plans will be rolled out that instruct how to climb up a ladder that is leaning against the wrong wall. Such plans typically aim at aligning individual academics' goals with institutional planning led by managers that have no or little academic background while the only directive a good academic should align with is the best argument. Academic supervision for full professors? This is only possible in a university system that has lost its way and real purpose. Academics are not managed employees, and professors must be role models in the defense of this important position. Universities are not companies but have far more important functions in Society than any company can have.

The issues mentioned above were in the air already last year when the *[Australian Association of University Professors \(AAUP\)](#)*<sup>1</sup> was founded at this University as the result of a conference organized by USAP entitled, *What should Universities be?* After as little as one year, AAUP already has 570 professorial members at all 39 Australian universities, several corresponding international members and is currently run by a Council representing 15 Australian universities.

The AAUP [Constitution](#)<sup>2</sup> has been noted for its objects that directly address several weaknesses

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.professorsiate.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.professorsiate.org/2020/03/21/constitution-of-the-australian-association-of-university-professors-available/>

of the Australian university system. A number of [position papers](#)<sup>3</sup> have been published by AAUP over the course of last year. They are simply signed AAUP based on democratic Council votes and not by individual authors. The government has begun to [listen](#)<sup>4</sup> to AAUP.

One of the most important outputs of AAUP is a set of nationally agreed [Pillars of a University](#)<sup>5</sup>. In some respects, they go beyond the [original University of Sydney version](#)<sup>6</sup>.

*For instance, any evaluation of teaching and research activity should be carried out by discipline peers and take into account contributions across all aspects of university work, including teaching, research and the wider community. This evaluation should be qualitative wherever possible and take into account the norms of the discipline in terms of qualitative vs. quantitative assessment and the level of institutional support and resources available for these core activities.*

Company-style “productivity” assessments by managers were rejected. The justification is that since not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted, those who count must know what to count and when not to count. For logical reasons alone that cannot be administrators/managers but must be disciplinary peers. Weak academics that have slipped into managerial roles are not valid peers and are thus also excluded from such a role. The fact that some professorships are now de facto awarded by management is as problematic as the fact that the Academic Board has been emasculated. The fact that USAP was founded more than 40 years ago when the professorial board was abandoned may provide food for thought.

The massive financial investments in bricks and mortar of the last few years are not going to pay off. What now? Some of the expensive buildings could be sold to companies in order to support academic positions during the crisis because the loss of some positions could take years or decades to rebuild. The professoriate has voted in support of concerted action between the University Executive and the Professoriate in order to find the best ways forward. Clearly, trustworthy leadership will be needed in the coming years and USAP has established a Vice Chancellor Search Committee that is making suggestions to the Senate Panel.

Much work needs to be done and a proactive, collaborative professorial think tank can do much good to this University. [You can join USAP here](#)<sup>7</sup>.

16 September 2020

Manuel B. Graeber  
USAP President

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.professoriate.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://docs.education.gov.au/australian-association-university-professors>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.professoriate.org/2020/03/21/statement-on-academic-freedom-the-pillars-of-a-university-what-a-university-should-be/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://usap.sydney.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-10-Pillars-of-a-University.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>

[https://sydney.onestopsecure.com/onestopweb/V9P/tran?UDS\\_ACTION=DEFAULT&UDS\\_ACTION\\_DATA=1334](https://sydney.onestopsecure.com/onestopweb/V9P/tran?UDS_ACTION=DEFAULT&UDS_ACTION_DATA=1334)