

National Alliance for Public Universities

**A CHARTER FOR
AUSTRALIA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

BACKGROUND

A Charter for Australia's Public Universities has been developed at a time when Australian public universities face an unprecedented threat. Despite the rapid expansion of higher education, it has never been more difficult for Australian university staff to cultivate critical knowledge. This circumstance has arisen from policy 'reforms' carried out by a succession of Australian governments, often enthusiastically implemented and sometimes initiated by university managers, which are premised on the assumption that higher education confers only private benefits. The current proposals to deregulate fees and open up public funding to private providers will ensure that, from here on, zero-sum market competition will determine all parameters of university governance and academic life.

The signatories to this charter affirm the purpose and value of Australia's universities as public institutions by outlining eight core principles that we believe underpin a coherent and independent public university system. The charter is premised on the straightforward proposition that universities provide a range of public and private benefits vital to the wellbeing of our society. These are secured only when universities are structurally autonomous from economic and political power, as articulated in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (1988):

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.¹

The 'free market' approach to governing universities employs categories and descriptions which fundamentally misrepresent the true purposes and values of public universities. Now is the time to articulate and reaffirm these values, which largely have gone missing in the debates about fees.

¹ 'Magna Charter Universitatum', 1988, *Magna Charter Universitatum Observatory*, Bologna: Bologna University.

EIGHT PRINCIPLES FOR AUSTRALIA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

- 1. Universities provide both public and private benefits. To fulfil these, they must function independently of market forces and political interference.**
- 2. The educational opportunities that universities provide are a basic right. Ongoing public financial support is required to ensure that these are sustained across generations.**
- 3. Universities are diverse intellectual communities centred on practices of critical scholarship and teaching, in which teachers and students collaborate in a common inquiry. This also creates a suitable environment for the development of the knowledge and practices necessary for a number of vocations and professions.**
- 4. Universities comprise diverse yet interdependent collegial communities whose collective health is dependent on the health of each respectively. Accordingly, they should be organised, managed and funded in line with the internal imperatives of those communities, with due flexibility to allow new ideas, research fields and practices to emerge.**
- 5. Good scholarship emerges from critical collegiality within an overall framework of collaboration, with standards established and negotiated amongst peers locally and internationally.**
- 6. Universities serve their local and regional communities, where different needs and cultures obtain, while also taking their place in national and international networks.**
- 7. Universities are spaces for public scholarship, rational debate and dissension, and play an indispensable role in nurturing a wider democratic and humane culture.**
- 8. Universities have a social mission, enabling social mobility while striving to dissolve entrenched social inequalities altogether.**

1. Universities provide both public and private benefits. To fulfil these, they must function independently of market forces and political interference.

1.1 Public universities generate a range of public and private goods. They rigorously pursue truth; they teach the next generation; they cultivate imagination and culture; they develop the research that secures the benefits of science, medicine, technology, arts, social policy and many other public goods; they train entrants to the workforce in necessary skills. Such goods are essential to public and civic life, cultivating the ethical and political practices for a democratic society that assumes responsibility for the flourishing of all its members.

1.2 Public universities serve the common good by staying true to their mission of scholarship and teaching. We do not doubt that, in doing so, they have come to play an important role in a modern economy. Ideally, their students enter the workforce capable of imaginative, critical, and independent thought and contribute to a range of sectors and industries. Likewise there are personal benefits: students enter universities with the expectation that a tertiary education will be a path to a satisfying career. In turn, the state benefits through increased tax receipts.² Such economic and personal benefits do not determine the purpose and activities of public universities, however, but are outcomes of them.

1.3 Recent Australian governments have dictated terms that have transformed universities into pseudo-corporate enterprises, and the proposal to deregulate fees and open up Commonwealth loans to private providers will give students no choice but to consider higher education as an investment in their 'human capital'. This has occurred while Australian governments progressively have cut the level of public support and shifted the financial burden to students. What was at first a 'contribution' is now a 'fee' to be paid in return for a service commodity. The stated objective of the latest reforms is to allow for the concentration of resources within the most established universities, ensuring that these commodities will be distributed unequally.

1.4 Managing universities using mechanisms like price signals and corporate competition or by way of conceiving of students as shoppers exercising consumer sovereignty is entirely inappropriate to the nature of the benefits that a university education confers. Customers are presumed to know what they want and what counts as getting it. Universities initiate students into disciplinary paradigms that they can hardly appreciate in advance or judge in terms of their instrumental use in pursuing employment.

² The net public return on investment for a man with tertiary education is over \$US105,000 across OECD countries – almost three times the amount of public investment in his education. For a woman, it is over \$US60,000, which is twice the public investment. OECD, 2014, *Education at a Glance*, Paris: OECD p. 156

Students derive meaningful personal benefit only as an outcome of acquiring independence of thought and an appreciation of the responsibilities of knowledge.

2. The educational opportunities that universities provide are a basic right. Ongoing public financial support is required to ensure that these are sustained across generations.

2.1 The opportunities for intellectual development and the other benefits that university education makes available should not be granted to some people while being withheld from others. University education serves vital social needs and there is no rational basis for the proposition that one person deserves a greater opportunity than another to grow intellectually. A universally accessible and publicly funded university system is the only way in which this right can adequately be honoured.

2.2 There is ample evidence that Australia's universities have been severely underfunded in recent decades. Australia ranks poorly in terms of public expenditure on university education as a percentage of GDP. Where OECD member states increased their public investment in tertiary education on average by 62% between 1995-2009,³ in Australia it increased by only 17%. Australia ranked 25 out of 29 OECD countries for public investment in higher education (1989–2011) and 24 out of 26 countries for growth of public investment in higher education over this period. Where spending per university student increased in most OECD countries between 1995 and 2011, in Australia it decreased.⁴

2.3 The proposal to deregulate fees avoids taking responsibility for this chronic underinvestment by shifting the burden onto future students who will shoulder this as an unprecedented accumulation of personal debt. Future generations of students will be doubly burdened: required to pay back their student loans and to be the taxpayers who will have to pay the costs of an unsustainable system, bearing the burden of any residual debts.

3. Universities are diverse intellectual communities centred on practices of critical scholarship and teaching, in which teachers and students collaborate in a common inquiry. This also creates a suitable environment for the development of the knowledge and practices necessary for a number of vocations and professions.

3.1 Underlying all aspects of university education, research and training are practices of scholarship and critical thought. Universities produce the conditions necessary for academics to pursue these, and, in so doing, exemplify for students practices of critical inquiry and problem solving. Both student and

³ Universities Australia, 2013, *An Agenda for Australian Higher Education, 2013–2016*, Universities Australia, Canberra p.55

⁴ OECD 2014, *Education at a Glance*, p.213

teacher must actively and repeatedly be engaged in this inquiry if it is to be properly self-critical. A customer-service notion of teaching and knowledge transmission is especially corrosive of this relationship, producing a sense of entitlement on the part of students based on purchasing power, and servility in teachers in the pursuit of 'customer satisfaction'.

3.2 The insistence on an antagonism between vocational and university education is misleading, and has led to an inversion of the relationship between scholarship and vocational skills. A healthy scholarly environment forms the basis for establishing good practice in the intellectual, ethical and technical skills specific to a number of professions and occupations, and accounts for why the role of universities extends into these areas. When university education is treated as a process of skills acquisition only, pedagogy tends towards a transmission model that abstracts and freezes knowledge.

3.3 Properly supported public universities draw people together from different social classes, backgrounds, genders and ethnicities. Society benefits from this heterogeneous intellectual community, which foments the new ideas that universities explore and disseminate.

4. Universities comprise diverse yet interdependent collegial communities whose collective health is dependent on the health of each respectively. Accordingly, they should be organised, managed and funded in line with the internal imperatives of those communities, with due flexibility to allow new ideas, research fields and practices to emerge.

4.1 Universities are home to multiple traditions of scholarly inquiry which have an institutional form in disciplines and other collegial communities. These traditions are continually renewed through radical self-criticism and cross-fertilisation. This produces new questions, leading to new kinds of research, and sometimes even new disciplines.

4.2 To maintain this diversity, the organisation, management and funding of universities must follow from the internal imperatives of these communities. Each needs to have effective power to determine its curricula, assessment procedures and research programmes. The competition model for resource distribution that has underpinned recent policy is anathema to disciplinary diversity. Rather than zero-sum competition, excellence is attained through collaboration and forms of rivalry that are cooperative in nature. Diversity thus is not an outcome of consumer 'choice' but a field of mutually enriching scholarly communities. If a language department is closed because it has failed to attract as many students as history, students have less choice and history is weakened by monolingual students.

5. Good scholarship emerges from critical collegiality within an overall framework of collaboration, with standards established and negotiated amongst peers locally and internationally.

5.1 Scholarly integrity and rigour is maintained through practices of collegial criticism. Most obviously, new scholarship must go through a process of peer review. However, mutual criticism informs all aspects of university life. The robustness of this runs through local relationships to international networks of scholars and disciplinary organisations. Critical collegiality is, ultimately, a habit of mind developed in a life dedicated to reflection and the pursuit of truth.

5.2 Contemporary universities have fallen prey to a culture of auditing based on customer satisfaction surveys, quality assurance metrics and compliance. This is sustained by the formalist belief that something worthwhile has been done if 'procedures have been followed'. No matter how finely calibrated the metrics, such data tell us nothing about the value of what actually has happened in a classroom or article. The reliance on procedures as a substitute for reasoned arguments, sensitive judgments and esteem only produces an endless deferral of judgment, leading to a deep-seated loss of confidence and a reluctance amongst academics to engage in non-measurable tasks – the sort which are essential to scholarly life.

5.3 Scholarship in public universities is further imperilled by the proposal to allow for-profit providers to enroll students on Commonwealth loans. Of necessity, such outfits cannot approach scholarship as an intrinsically meaningful activity that serves the public good. They are universities only insofar as adopting this corporate form allows them to establish a successful business model. This will come from undercutting public universities, which inevitably will respond by terminating those unprofitable intellectual activities that secure the public good.

6. Universities serve their local and regional communities, where different needs and cultures obtain, while also taking their place in national and international networks.

6.1 Public universities exist in particular contexts and serve local and regional needs, as well as national and international ones. They are often at the heart of their community, providing employment and stimulating local cultures. In outer-suburban and regional Australia, especially, they have been important sources of employment and regeneration as particular industries decline.

6.2 In its budget papers, the government has stressed the importance of inter-institutional competition as 'measured' by international rankings. This follows the fallacy that the success of a national university system can be judged only by focussing on the highest ranked institutions. Not surprisingly, it is the

longer established elite universities that have most vociferously supported the proposals. As per the disciplines, zero-sum competition amongst universities comes at the expense of the health of the system as a whole, and the localities that each serves.

7. Universities are spaces for public scholarship, rational debate and dissension, and play an indispensable role in nurturing a wider democratic and humane culture.

7.1 Public universities constitute a public space in which ideas and claims to expertise can be tested transparently and made available for the entire society. They are places where standards of rational justification are elaborated, put to work in the detailed practices of inquiry, and themselves rationally evaluated, and this informs and flows into various other arenas of civic life. They also enable members of society to inquire into how best to define and pursue fundamental human goods such as justice and truth.

7.2 Universities are places where ethical, political, scientific and aesthetic norms are contested. Unfettered debate in which no belief is immune from possible challenge is critical for any society aspiring to rational and democratic principles. Since a society's dominant ideas frequently align with the interests of its most powerful members, dissent is valuable in itself as it raises the possibility of release from those interests. Universities normalise open debate by insisting on the ongoing justification and, if necessary, the renovation or discarding of accepted norms.

8. Universities have a social mission, enabling social mobility while striving to dissolve entrenched social inequalities altogether.

8.1 Public education is one of the primary means of ensuring equality of opportunity in life and militates against the unfair advantages accruing to those that inherit greater economic means and other privileges. This is not to imply that the social mission of public universities is limited to the opportunities that they can provide to individuals. By performing their roles as institutions of public scholarship, universities help to dissolve the structural basis of inequality. For example, they help to prevent the inequalities that arise when knowledge is privately owned or restricted undemocratically.

8.2 The government intends that those degree programs that lead to higher paying jobs should accordingly charge higher fees, and that these should be aligned with particular high-status, selective institutions. In effect, they are creating a system in which education will increasingly function as a 'positional good'. Those institutions with the greatest 'positional' effects will be disproportionately

available to those able to pay whether by virtue of the advantages bestowed by private schools, or by virtue of the disincentive effects of higher fees.⁵ The social trajectory of these reforms is unmistakable.

8.3 Evidence has mounted that Australia has been manifesting an alarming increase in income and wealth inequality since the 1980s.⁶ The level of earnings inequality, as well as the incidence of low pay, is high by international standards.⁷ This is the context for the proposals that will dramatically increase the scale of fees and student debt.

Acknowledgement

A Charter for Australia's Universities was drafted by a working group from the National Alliance for Public Universities. It was inspired by *In Defence of Higher Education*, an alternative 'white paper' that was put together by academics and campaigners in the United Kingdom in 2011. This can be found at the link below. Some of the propositions from that were used as starting points, however, excepting a couple of overlaps, the text of the present document is original.

<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/2011/09/27/higher-education-white-paper-is-provoking-a-winter-of-discontent/>

⁵ US research suggests that those most likely to be affected will be low-income students who are more 'price sensitive' than their wealthier peers, suggesting that social mobility will be compromised. D. Mundel, 2008, 'What do we know about the impact of grants to college students?' In S. Baum, M. McPherson and P. Steele (eds.), *The Effectiveness of Student Aid Policies*. New York: Basic Books (pp. 9-38).

⁶ R. Denniss et al., 2014, *Advance Australia Fair? What to do about growing inequality in Australia*, Australia 21 and The Australia Institute, April, p. 13.

⁷ OECD, 2014, *Social and Welfare Issues Inequality*, OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/social/inequality.htm>