

**Submission
No 10**

**INQUIRY INTO THE GOVERNANCE OF NSW
UNIVERSITIES**

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The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
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Dear Sir or Madam,

Please find below a submission to your Committee of Inquiry into governance matters for Universities in the State of New South Wales.

I served between 1981-1990 as Deputy Chancellor of the University of NSW (UNSW), and also for some fifteen years as a member of the UNSW Council elected by its graduates (an "external member"). Having briefly been a member of a very much larger Council (49 members) under the founding Act of the University in the late 1960s, spent many years overseas and returned in the early 1980s, I have personally seen the Council operating in some very different compositional and policy frameworks. I have also acted more recently as President of the UNSW Alumni Association and in that capacity I was charged by the Alumni Board with making submissions to State and Federal inquiries on the important role of graduates/alumni in contributing to the governance as well as the support of "their" institution. The present submission is however a personal one, as I am no longer involved with either body.

I would like to address two points within the Committee's Terms of Reference.

1. Relations between a Governing Body/Council, the Chancellor/Chair and the Vice-Chancellor/President (ToRs 1-7)

In my experience, this trilateral set of relations is most likely to become troubled when a Council either does not have, or does not "own" (because it has been excluded from the process) an appropriate set of performance criteria for its Vice-Chancellor. Trouble can also arise when the application of the criteria is left to a small, non-representative subset of the Council, or, worse, to a Chancellor acting virtually alone (either "against" or "in defence of" a Vice-Chancellor), thus excluding the views of the rest of Council.

Arriving at an adequate set of performance criteria is not simple and certainly, until recently, there were (again in my experience) no very useful models. Most Chancellors have either never experienced the process of developing and applying such criteria (having backgrounds such as legal, medical, academic etc); or, if from a business background, are insufficiently sensitive to the differences between appraising commercial performance and performance in leadership of a contemporary Australian academy.

For their part, it is a rare Vice-Chancellor indeed who volunteers to fetter their power by submitting him or herself to a rigorous process of evaluation by what most executives believe is likely to be a fickle body of Council members. They prefer to invest mostly in a personal relationship with a Chancellor, and on occasion, are able effectively to select their own appraiser, by involving themselves in the election of a new Chancellor. The much-vaunted National Governance Protocols are as silent on this all-important topic of assessment of a Vice-Chancellor's performance as they are on the matching issue of assessment of a Chancellor's and Council's contribution to their institution.

In my judgment, there are 3 areas in which a Vice-Chancellor's performance should be evaluated:

1. Relations with the Council (not just its Chair)
2. Relations with the academic community (not just their own executive)
3. Relations with the community at large, including alumni and supporters of the University

The scope of this critical activity is very different from that which applies to a conventional commercial or business enterprise, although of course financial and strategic management will form an important part of all three areas of assessment.

I believe Australian Universities should be encouraged to develop and promulgate suitable models for assessment of a Vice-Chancellor's performance, along with appropriate transparency of process in their

application (eg degree of consultations with the different communities involved etc) and to abandon existing processes which tend to delegate both the developmental and assessment processes to small in-groups.

2. The Special Role of Alumni in the Composition of a Governing Body (ToR 8, which fails to mention alumni, and ToR 9)

In all the arguments about composition of governing bodies, little attention has been paid to the special role of alumni or graduates of the institution. This is despite general agreement that the time has come for Universities to appeal to their alumni increasingly for financial and practical support.

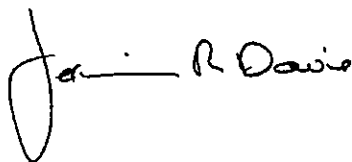
There are fundamentally 3 reasons why alumni form a critical component of modern university governance around the world, and why top-tier institutions such as Harvard, Stanford, Oxford, University of London and so on, jealously maintain such institutional arrangements.

1. Alumni members combine the best of both "external" and "internal" membership characteristics – detachment because their daily lives lie outside the academy but also a deeper knowledge of it than almost any non-graduate. They bridge between other "external" members (professional, business and Parliamentary members) and "internals" members (staff, officers and students).
2. Alumni members have direct personal stake in the University from which they graduated: the status and value of their degrees. This gives them an abiding interest in the on-going success of the University.
3. Alumni bodies which are regularly consulted on the nomination (preferably the election) of some of their number to participate in the governance of their University are better-briefed about the challenges facing their alma mater and thus to respond positively when asked for practical support.

I append a short personal submission to the JCHE Review of the National Governance Protocols in July 2007 which expands on these points.

Since then, I believe more than one NSW University has canvassed the desirability of abolishing alumni elections and/or reducing the number of positions dedicated to ensuring alumni participation in order to down-size. I believe if alumni generally were aware of such moves, they would be speaking out against such an idea. Silence suggests that they and their representative bodies have probably not been consulted. The Committee should insist that any such changes are canvassed with those affected before being endorsed. In addition, it is difficult to see why, at a time when even corporate Annual General Meetings are increasingly moving to greater share-holder participation via electronic voting, and when the electoral process itself is such a focus of attention around the world, Parliaments should permit governing bodies of Universities to abolish such outreach provisions to one of their key stake-holder groups. Technology now makes world-wide contact with alumni both feasible and desirable (eg for fund-raising): why not then for participation in governance? If a reduction in governing body size is considered desirable, it is perfectly possible to achieve this by cuts to all groups, rather than by seeking to eliminate the very group to which administrators are looking to play a key role in the future success of its University.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Jessica Milner Davis