

**Submission
No 24**

**INQUIRY INTO FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NSW
TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR**

Name: Ms Miranda Korzy

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into the
Future Development of the NSW Tertiary Education Sector

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the future development of the NSW tertiary education sector.

My own degrees (a Bachelor of Arts from the Australian National University and a Master of International Journalism from City, the University of London) opened up new worlds for me and equipped me with critical thinking and research skills that have enabled me to work in a variety of areas. These include public health research, IT and journalism.

I would like to comment on Terms of Reference 1(a), (b), (c), (d), and (f).

Summary for Section 1.

(a) The most important role of universities is to encourage the development of knowledge – which is essential for the proper functioning of modern democracies at all levels. This role should not be displaced by universities’ economic functions.

(b) I would like to see a university set up on Sydney’s Northern Beaches to fulfil economic and other roles of universities. In Australia students generally attend local universities, but the closest to this area is more than 30km away.

(c) Universities and TAFE should be free to all students – to guarantee access to everyone, irrespective of family finances, age or gender. To protect independent thought within the

institutions, they must also be safeguarded from interference by economic or political interests. The best way to do this is through guaranteed government funding – as happens in Germany.

(d) We need to end casual employment conditions for staff within the university system to give them certainty and security in both their professional and private lives – enabling them to produce work of the highest quality.

(f) Campus life is important to students (and staff) because it helps them form friendships, guarding against the loneliness that can afflict students and cause mental health problems. To ensure a vibrant campus life exists, compulsory student unionism should be reintroduced.

To ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds or mature aged students can afford to study - without working so many hours that it negatively impacts their study and down time - student allowances should be increased.

(a) Tertiary education's economic development role, especially university campuses and Country University Centres (CUCs) in regional NSW;

Universities now perform a major economic function in modern societies – preparing students for their working lives, sometimes explicitly through a range of vocational courses but just as importantly through the study of many less applied disciplines.

They are also a major source of employment and in recent years, have been turned into significant generators of foreign income. Meanwhile, **by retaining young people in education for longer, they have helped lower unemployment rates in the community** (See Barry Jones, Sleepers Wake! Technology & The Future of Work, 1982).

However, the most important role of universities is to encourage the development of knowledge – using imagination, critical thinking and research skills. Graduates then apply these skills and discoveries throughout society at every level - from within local communities to government level. This role should not be displaced by universities' economic functions.

(b) The mission of NSW universities with a particular focus on the role of universities to serve specific geographic communities

Universities in Sydney were generally set up so that most students travel from home (or other accommodation off campus) to classes on campus. However, some areas, like Sydney's Northern Beaches where I live, are so far from any university, that commuting to them consumes many hours. I would therefore like to see a university established on the Northern Beaches.

The closest university to where I live is Macquarie University, which is 34km away, followed by the University of Technology, more than 40 km away. It regularly takes two hours or more to reach these by public transport. A local university would create local employment in academic and support roles, as well as lead to the creation of more jobs in these sectors on the Northern Beaches - to support the Greater Sydney Commission's plan for a metropolis of three cities.

We have the relatively new Northern Beaches Hospital at Frenchs Forest that could support a medical school and other health sciences. The area is also surrounded by bushland and with the coast adjacent – which would lend themselves to study of the natural sciences and tourism. Many artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians and journalists live in the community, who could help develop an arts, humanities and communications faculty. And with many IT workers locally, a software engineering school also seems like a good prospect – one of the federal government's priority areas.

As this would be a new university, it should be developed in a single location rather than as a US-style distributed campus. This makes it easier for students to study across different disciplines and encourages interaction and collaboration between faculties as well – which often leads to innovative and important research and discoveries. It also promotes a lively campus life – both academically, politically and socially.

(c) The post-pandemic return of foreign student numbers and the financial sustainability and risk management strategies of NSW tertiary education institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic and funding cuts over many years have now combined to create an existential threat to our university system. As part of the recovery from the health crisis, we now need to rebuild university funding so that it is robust and not dependent on international students or economic conditions.

Modelling from the Mitchell Institute in April indicated that universities are likely to lose \$19 billion over the next three years due to the absence of international students. (See Hurley, P, Van Dyke, N, 2020. Australian investment in education: higher education. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/australian-investment-in-education-higher-education-mitchell-institute.pdf>).

As a result, researcher Peter Hurley says domestic students and staff will suffer.

“With this revenue stream suddenly threatened, the education experience of domestic students will suffer. Universities will need to make deep cuts to staff and courses without further assistance.

“This will come at a time when Australia will need its higher education sector as part of any COVID-19 recovery. It is likely demand from domestic students for university places will rise because of workers looking to re-skill and up-skill.”

(See Hurley, Peter in “Australian universities could lose \$19 billion in the next 3 years. Our economy will suffer with them,” The Conversation, April 17, 2020
<https://theconversation.com/australian-universities-could-lose-19-billion-in-the-next-3-years-our-economy-will-suffer-with-them-136251>)

However, as foreign students gradually return to Australia after the pandemic and while

it is important for universities to attract them to create a flow of ideas, the massive numbers that have been studying in Australia are effecting the experience of students and quite possibly the integrity of our degrees.

The poor standard of English of many overseas students in Australia was documented by a Four Corners investigation in 2016, “Degrees of Deception” (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQlad0nN3x8>). It revealed the links between universities and corrupt overseas agents who recruit students without adequate English skills, the practice of turning a blind eye to cheating (such as plagiarism), and of pressure exerted on academics to pass foreign students who have failed exams (something my own friends have experienced and told me about.)

But Australian students have also been paying substantial fees for many years now, and this is building unsustainable debts that will weigh down graduates and the economy into the foreseeable future.

We can see how this has developed in the US, where 45 million citizens carry student debt totalling \$US1.5 trillion - debts that many, particularly women, will be unable to repay. Federal funding there fell from the mid-1960s to 1990; similarly for state funding in the 1980s. At the same time, tuition costs have risen since the 1950s.

“For many of this generation, higher education has not only failed to deliver on its promise of prosperity but left them trapped in a student debt nightmare. As the issue emerges as a big theme of the 2020 US presidential election, experts are urging policymakers to tackle the spiralling US student loan crisis.

“... A heavy burden of student debt brings wider economic consequences, including lower rates of home ownership, small business creation and consumer spending.”

(See The \$1.6tn US student debt nightmare, Financial Times, December 27, 2019

<https://www.ft.com/content/0af6a04c-1881-4969-93d0-a943673ac4f2>)

Another problematic source of income for universities has been private funding. The credibility of research funded by private sources is always open to question as a result of potential conflicts of interest – with companies often suppressing results that might conflict with marketing of products (such as pharmaceuticals). (See <https://theconversation.com/people-dont-trust-scientific-research-when-companies-are-involved-76848>)

I have seen the inefficiencies of this form of funding at the Australian National University where I worked on a privately-funded project for a number of years. It was only too common for highly trained researchers to be forced to spend significant amounts of time applying for multiple grants to be able to continue their work.

Our system contrasts with university education in Germany – with the strongest economy in Europe and one of the world’s leaders in science and technology. University education in Germany is free to all students, local and foreign. This is made possible by state and federal government funding. As a result, it would be cheaper for my children to study in Germany than Australia.

“Germany’s (approximately) 240 public higher education institutions are funded by the Länder (states) ... However, the Federal Government and the states also cooperate when it comes to support for science, research and teaching. Projects of supraregional importance, such as the Excellence Strategy and the Higher Education Pact, are funded jointly.

“In addition, the Federal Government finances large-scale scientific research projects ...”

(See German government website: Research in Germany - Government Funding

<https://www.research-in-germany.org/en/research-funding/research-funding-system/government-funding.html#:~:text=Fundamentally%2C%20Germany's%20approx.,for%20science%2C%20research%20and%20teaching.>)

We now have no choice but to abandon the current Australian model of university funding before it collapses, taking the universities with it. Its replacement must recognise that university education benefits the whole community – and not just individuals. And whilst many graduates work in areas critical to the community, they often earn less than those who have never been to university. A system that leaves students tens of thousands of dollars in debt also discourages those from less well-off families from studying, because they or their families will worry that they will never be able to repay the amount.

Instead, universities and TAFE education should be free to all students – to guarantee access to everyone, irrespective of family finances, age or gender. To protect independent thought within the institutions, they must also be safeguarded from interference by economic or political interests.

The best way to do this is through guaranteed government funding – as happens in Germany.

(d) The quality of university teaching and research, including the extent and impact of insecure employment in the sector

A number of recent reports have indicated that 70 per cent of university employment is on a casual basis. At work, this creates an enormous amount of uncertainty for staff who are involved in ongoing projects and departments that have ongoing needs for particular kinds of work.

As mentioned above, the system of private funding and grants also creates problems with conflicts of interest and academics forced to spend large amounts of time applying for multiple grants.

On a personal level, the financial pressures can be debilitating for some academics on short term contracts. One old friend of mine, who was a lecturer and researcher at Sydney University for many years on a project of national security interest, was never able to secure permanent employment. As a result, they were unable to buy a house within Sydney, spent hours commuting each day so sometimes slept on the office floor to avoid the trip home late at night, and eventually moved to the US to take up a permanent job.

We therefore need to end ad hoc employment conditions for staff within the university system to give them the certainty and security they need in both their professional and private lives – and which will enable them to produce work of the highest quality.

(f) The quality of campus life and student freedom of expression

Students these days - particularly those who cannot live at home because of the distance to campus - have enormous financial pressures on them due to the high cost of rent and other living expenses as well as ongoing concerns about repaying university fees. As a result, going to university for many amounts to hurrying between classes and part-time work. I hear from my children and many of my friends that these days, campus life is very limited because so few students have time to be involved.

However, these experiences – in politics, drama, debating, sport etc – can help lay the basis for future careers and often help students make friends on campus. Without these friendships, university can be a very lonely place, contributing to poor mental health for some students.

Campus life is further diminished at universities like Macquarie, where the Student Union was dissolved in 2007 and student organisations were taken over by the university. Local students tell me that as a result the university has fewer clubs on campus and setting up a club can be problematic.

To ensure all students (and staff) have the opportunity to join in clubs and political activity, compulsory student unionism should be re-introduced.

To ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds or mature aged students can afford to study - without working so many hours that it impacts on their study and ability to make friends - student allowances should be increased.

Miranda Korzy