

**WA Today, 12 August 2021**

**Opinion**

## **Dear Mark McGowan, you wouldn't ask this of a mining company**

**West Australian universities are in the thick of a crisis that the McGowan government should address right away and ensure universities live up to noble expectations set out for them under state law, writes one of WA's most reputed academics.**

By Gerd Schröder-Turk

In 1911, 1966, 1975 and 1984 the parliamentarians of Western Australia considered the educational needs of the population and the important role of knowledge and learning institutions within society.

In each of these years they established a new university, and legislated principled educational and societal goals.

Fast forward to 2020.

WA universities manage themselves with no oversight.

The [Australian Association of University Professors described Australia's university system to be in an "acute crisis"](#) that had "been decades in the making"; "COVID-19 had just tipped it over the edge".

WA's universities are in the thick of that crisis, reflected in the many media reports of cuts to staff and degree programs, reductions in admission standards and education quality, excessive executive salaries, over-casualisation, loss of face-to-face education, an obsession with rankings and metrics, and external interference. The list goes on.

A royal commission is in order, but that should not stop the government from addressing some issues right away.

To be clear, that is the state government – the McGowan government.

Universities are set up under state legislation. The two common excuses that funding and quality regulations are Commonwealth matters do not absolve the state government of its clear responsibility.

True, the federal government, along with students themselves, provides most funding, but university financial reports are tabled in State Parliament. The state government must ensure that public resources and student fees, and its own significant research and infrastructure investments, are prudently and effectively used, and accounted for transparently.

As for academic standards, it is a myth that the federal regulator (the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) ensures high quality. Rather, the TEQSA standards merely set “the minimum acceptable requirements for the provision of higher education”.

This is a low bar that all public universities should always exceed.

It was state parliamentarians who envisioned more noble and principled purposes and mandated these through the WA University Acts: for example, Murdoch University’s purpose is the “advancement of learning and knowledge” and it should serve the community by “promoting critical and free enquiry and informed intellectual discussion”.

The McGowan government needs to ensure that universities live up to these noble expectations set out for them in law in the state university acts.

The catch is that universities are autonomous.

Independence from government and politics is a defining feature; history and international policies such as the [Magna Charta Universitatum](#) (to which UWA is a signatory) and the [UNESCO Recommendations](#) teach us that it is best to leave it that way.

How then can the state government fix the universities without interfering unduly with their operations?

The key is to focus on university governance rather than on management.

WA’s universities have legislated governing boards, senates or councils, with broad powers.

For example, ECU’s council “has power to do all things necessary or convenient to be done for or in connection with the operation, affairs, concerns and property of the university”.

With power comes responsibility and accountability. Responsibility that the university managements act in the interests of the public. Accountability to the government and the public that legislated expectations are met.

The government’s first lever is to ensure senates are competently set up, the second is to ensure senates know they will be held to account.

A mining company or a hospital would never have a board without solid industry-specific expertise. Universities shouldn’t either – but many do.

Each of the WA university senates have 17 members, of which only a small minority have any professional experience in higher education, let alone as an academic.

Critically, the state government made this situation worse through a legislation change in 2016 when it reduced the elected academic staff members on the senates to a single member.

It also legislated the creation of a ‘nominations committee’ which gives senate members without university experience greater say in selecting new members – a potentially dangerous self-selection mechanism.

The government should urgently review this damaging legislative change that the current Minister for Education and Training, Sue Ellery, criticised at the time, to her credit.

A further issue is the failure to ensure involvement of academics in decision-making. Legislation mandates that universities set up academic boards charged with advising “on any issues of broad importance to the academic life of the university”.

Yet university executives make plans to axe strategically important degree programs – Asian languages, STEM and social sciences – without providing any indication that the academic boards were even informed about the plans. What a blatant disregard for the legislated role of academic boards, and the informed wisdom of the academic community!

The McGowan government must monitor the senates’ oversight of academic governance. Mandating that senates and academic boards publish detailed minutes would be a first step.

Above all, there needs to be a signal from the McGowan government that it takes its responsibility for university governance seriously. For example, it was good to see parliamentary scrutiny of Curtin University’s request to change rules around council appointments (because “the university is in effect avoiding the scrutiny of the Parliament”). Public university means public interest.

It is time to change the mindset. Our public universities, their educational and research programs are precious public assets. Vice chancellors are the custodians who look after these assets on behalf of the public. As academic principals, they must be the stewards of transparent committee-based decisions guided by the academic collegium.

This is not a utopia but the organisational model for universities that I believe best ensures WA students get a high-quality education and great university experience for their (rather expensive) student fees.

To do so helps ensure that our society reaps the long-term benefits that an empowered, rigorous, independent academia brings.

This will ensure we have the universities that former WA parliamentarians prescribed when they acted to establish these public institutions for the benefit of the state.

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