

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Australian Universities and the Government Problem: Could Reconnecting with Students be a Way Forward?

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:**

Australian universities have a problem with the government. Recent policy decisions such as excluding Australian universities from accessing *JobKeeper*, a AUD130 billion wage subsidy package to provide support for organisations impacted by the workforce disruptions resulting from COVID-19 lockdowns, suggests anti-university sentiment. This is interesting when considering large and small private higher education providers were included in the scheme.

The question is: what can we do about it? Shifting the strategic planning perspective from an oppositional ideological lens to a common student-focused lens, could result in the development of a higher education policy that positions students at the centre. With students, for students. A shift in strategic direction and reconnection with Australian university students may provide a sustainable, alternate and productive pathway to higher education innovation, discovery, an increase in Australian national productivity and reduce the likelihood of politically motivated interference in the Australian higher education sector.

**Paper:**

Australian universities have a problem with the government. Recent policy decisions such as excluding Australian universities from accessing *JobKeeper*, a AUD130 billion wage subsidy package to provide support for organisations impacted by the workforce disruptions resulting from COVID-19 lockdowns, suggests anti-university sentiment. This is interesting when considering large and small private higher education providers were included in the scheme. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australian universities has been significant. The loss of billions of dollars in revenue resulting in more than 17,000 staff redundancies threatens the viability of university teaching and research (Forsyth and Sherington, 2021). This recent funding shortfall compounded a four decade prior funding squeeze (Tiffen, 2020), sudden loss of international student enrolments a lucrative, alternate revenue source relied on since 1986 to plug the funding shortfall (Horne, 2020), and the casualisation of the academic workforce (Smith, 2021; Chrysanthos and Baker, 2020). And, from an equity perspective, while redundant university employees and their families were experiencing hardship and economic pain, Australian vice-chancellors were enjoying salaries more than 16 times the pay of Senior Lecturers [Level B] (Rowlands and Boden, 2020).

Australian Higher Education institutions enrolled 1,609,708 higher education students in 2019 including 1,086,050 domestic students. We know that higher education is a critical success factor in advancing Australia's national interests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Higher education transforms the lives of individuals, their families and their communities. It drives innovation, creativity, economic prosperity, entrepreneurialism, and scientific discovery in national and global contexts. For example, where would we be today without the scientists and scientific technologies to identify the genetic code of COVID-19 and develop vaccines to prevent infection, illness and death from this global pandemic? Perhaps the experience of the 1918 'Spanish' influenza pandemic in which approximately 500 million people were infected, and 50 million people died, is a useful comparison.

National governments, therefore, have a duty of care to ensure that the higher education system for which they are responsible is funded, accessible to all and protected from political interference. Universities, need to be able to access resources to ensure the learning experience for higher education students is rigorous academically, intellectually stimulating and prepares graduates for a myriad of careers that will continue to evolve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is more likely to occur if students are actively engaged in the learning process. However, several participants in a recent study positioned the lack of student engagement as a higher education challenge. "The lack of engaged students is a problem for the sector" (citing Simon Marginson, Howes, 2020). This topic was also explored in detail by Hil (2015) presenting findings that should be a concern for all staff working in the Australian higher education sector.

Creative strategic planning framed on the values and aspirations of ALL the university stakeholders has the capacity to "excite and inspire academic communities in universities throughout Australia" (Howes, 2018). This paper will present the results of a documentary analysis of Australian university strategic plans, focusing on the values expressed in the strategic aspirations and the social production of the document constructed to answer the question posed by Carolyn Noble (cited Howes, 2020), "what a Strategic Plan would have to look like to get students excited". The findings recommend executives engage students in strategic planning and position them as the most important stakeholder in Australian universities. The results also suggest that students who are 'strategically powerless' are less likely to be motivated and engaged in the learning process, a situation exacerbated by 18-months of virtual instruction in 2020-2021.

There are obviously ideological disagreements between the Australian government and the Australian university sector. The question is: what can and what should we do about it? Shifting the strategic planning perspective from an oppositional ideological lens to a common student-focused lens, could result in the development of a higher education policy that positions students at the centre, if it is developed with students as partners in the process. With students, for students. A shift in strategic direction and reconnection with Australian university students may provide a sustainable, alternate and productive pathway to higher education innovation, discovery, an increase in Australian national productivity and reduce the likelihood of politically motivated interference in the Australian higher education sector.

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