

Lowering Standards: Australian Universities, English Requirements and Student Cash Cows

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There are no protests on the streets and no effigies of university officials being burned by protesting students today. There are no protests outside the offices of the over-remunerated Vice Chancellors and their various henchpersons.

It is business and malpractice as usual after [revelations](#) by Australia's national broadcaster that Australian universities have been adjusting admission requirements to boost student numbers. Standards have been cooked, if not waived altogether, on the issue of English proficiency. Student bodies are the university equivalent of lebensraum: the expansive steppes of the Asian student market, to be exploited and leeched.

Since Australian universities first started entering the foreign market of education in 1986, a dependency on international students has taken a clenching, and corrupting hold. Such students mean one thing: revenue. Between 1988 and 2014, the number of international students at Australian universities [climbed](#) 13-fold.

Issues such as fudging results on language proficiency, false documents and online sites plump with ready-made material for submission, have proliferated. But these instances enabled universities to play dumb: they were the ones facing unscrupulous students desperate to get an Australian minted education. Universities could still claim that they, somehow or rather, were maintaining appropriate standards of admission, whatever those sly applicants might be up to. A few might get through, but they would be found out and weeded into oblivion.

This façade has been comprehensively holed in recent years, and the brackish water is making its way through the system. Universities, hungry and operating like famine stricken urchins, have been seeking more students than ever. In 2015, the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) raked through the university system in that state, [finding](#) what it modestly called “corruption risks”. To “intertwine compliance and profit rather than separating them, and to reward profit over compliance, can be conducive to questionable and corrupt behaviour.” ICAC is almost sympathetic to the insidious behaviour of university apparatchiks: “Students may be struggling to pass, but universities cannot afford to fail them.” Wither standards!

The recommendations by ICAC were hardly upending in nature, going to, amongst other things, limiting the number of overseas agents with which universities are engaged in; divorcing the issue of compliance from the issue of development “where feasible, which may include moving the admission functions out of international student offices that are responsible for marketing and recruitment”; and “considering the full costs associated with international students of different capabilities when making marketing decisions”.

As with other overgrown and self-serving bureaucracies, the modern university resists with a fanatic's zeal, always happy to doff the cap to such suggestions while happy to expand, and in some cases refine, the abuse. Which brings us to the Four Corner's Report.

The picture painted is bleak for those believing in academic standards. Since 2016, the Federal Government made a cardinal error: granting universities greater scope in determining the credibility of applications from students from certain countries, notably in such areas as English proficiency. This was the equivalent of giving a bellicose military full scope and decision in making war, removing any civilian controls.

Education departments were cut out of the picture; universities were granted full dispensation to waive standards deemed unnecessary or onerous for the applicant. Given the value of the education industry – \$34 billion per annum – and a reduction in federal funding – this was a license to manipulate and omit. Approvals from universities, submitted in visa applications, have ensured a smooth, and rapid approval process. Andrew Durston, former employee of the Immigration Department, [was](#) adamant that the practice was yielding unsatisfactory, and spoiled fruit.

“I think there's evidence to show that there are students who are being granted visas who haven't actually undertaken an English language test.”

The [practice](#) of accepting “medium of instruction” (MOI) letters for postgraduate students from India and Nepal, for instance, stating that students have previously studied in English, has also caught the eye of the Home Affairs Department. Such a letter would “not meet the legislative requirements” as evidence for a visa application.

This is an act of mutual harm. It denies the student a worthy assessment while also prostituting the application and any requisite standards of offered courses. What matters is the issue of cash funnelled into corporations that, for the most part, have ceased achieving their public purpose. They have become ungainly, mismanaged amalgams run by individuals who refrain from performing those dirty tasks of researching and teaching, preferring the cocktail circuit, spreadsheets and boardrooms.

University commissars have come out to deny the existence of any problem. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [sees](#) “little evidence to suggest there is a systemic failure regarding compliance with English language requirements.” Professor Margaret Gardner, Chair of Universities Australia, has access to “overall statistics” [revealing](#) that, “international students... pass successfully at about the same rate as domestic students.” It has been years since the good professor taught a class let alone graded a paper; ignorance is such merry bliss.

There was one exception, if only a minor one. The University of Tasmania was sufficiently [alarmed](#) by Monday's program to consider a review, despite its Vice Chancellor Rufus Black suggesting how much the institution “intrinsically” cared about “international students”. (Abusers always feign a degree of necessary caring.) UTAS had featured in the investigation in a rather damning fashion: a staff member had [sent an email](#) outlining the money lust of a recruitment drive. “As a part of our last-mile efforts to encourage acceptances for July 2018, the university will be waiving the English condition in order to assist the students who have yet to meet their English conditions.” The true spirit of a standard-free recruitment drive.

When universities speak of an independent external review, both words tend to be suspect. Pick your investigator, pick your result. Importantly, pick a person of like mind and background to eliminate room for error and space for disruption. In this case, the individual selected by the task of examining admission practices in UTAS is Hilary Winchester, director and principal of a company bearing her name, an [expert](#), we are told in “higher education quality assurance”.

Combing through the exploits of Winchester reveals a pedigree that is bound to resist revolt and revolution; brooms and mops will be kept at home. She is, after all, one of *them*, greasing the ranks and attaining the appropriate position in the managerial strata of higher education: formerly Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) at Flinders University and Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and Research) at Central Queensland University. As universities have been seized by such very types, Vice Chancellor Black and his PVC guards should have little to concern themselves about. Assurances, if lacking in quality, are guaranteed.

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