

3

University Governance and Students

Read this chapter if you would like the following issues addressed:

- How are universities organised in terms of governance and management?
- How do governance and management affect students?
- What should students do if they are not satisfied with issues that relate to university governance and management?

Universities can be very daunting places to outsiders and to newcomers, so it is not surprising that many students feel a little overwhelmed when they first arrive as undergraduates. The good part about being overwhelmed is that this presents many opportunities for exploration of interesting buildings, sports facilities, laboratories and libraries. However, some students are so intimidated by the scale and size of the major university campuses that they instead opt for the more cosy environment of the smaller universities, just to avoid contending with the scale of the larger ones.

It isn't just the size of university campuses that can be intimidating. It is also the nature of the university governance/management system that is confusing, even to those who have been in the system for some years. Much of what exists has been handed down from decades or centuries ago, with a collection of adaptations and patches to improve its relevance to the modern world. So, universities can also be very strange places, where state-of-the-art computers sometimes have to live in a 19th Century sandstone building that was designed to house students writing on slate boards. The management structures are little different – modern financial management and student records systems sometimes have to be superimposed on top of an organisational structure and attitudes that have been handed down from 14th Century traditions.

In this chapter, we therefore seek to demystify the way in which universities are structured and governed, and how this impacts upon the students who have to study within. Specifically,

we will examine the core elements that are common to most, if not all, Australian universities. These are:

- The University Council.
- University Divisions.
- The Chancellery.
- The Academic Board and its Committees.
- The Committee of Convocation.
- The Faculties and Deans.
- Departments and Schools.
- Research Institutes and Centres.
- Corporate Services and Administration.
- Academic staff – Professors, Readers, Associate Professors, Senior Lecturers, Lecturers, Postdoctoral Researchers, Tutors and Demonstrators.

Australian universities have similar, but not identical, structures and there is no single model that encompasses all of them. The specifics of the model that exists in any one university are a function of the Act of Establishment under which a university was created, combined with the managerial necessities and historical “hand-me-downs” that led to the final organisational structure.

To simplify our discussions, we will look at a generalised university structure, which embodies the core elements that in exist in almost all Australian universities.

Figure 3.1 is a block diagram that shows how all the major academic elements of the university fit together in a broad sense, with respect to the undergraduate student. In addition to these, like any other organisation that provides services on a large scale, there are all the corporate elements that enable the university to function in an administrative sense. These are shown in Figure 3.2. In Australian universities, there are typically almost as many administrative staff as there are academic staff, reflecting the significant cost burden imposed by corporate activities. The specific titles of departments and various boards and committees vary from university to university but generally exist in one form or another throughout the Australian system.

Looking first at the academic side of the university in Figure 3.1, the key feature that becomes apparent is that there exist both executive bodies and elected bodies. In the Australian university system, the executive is represented by the chancellery and the elected bodies are the university council and its committees and boards. The arrangement is notionally designed to protect the public interest and prevent individuals, including the vice chancellor (VC), from making decisions based upon personal, vested or career interests and imposing these upon the university. In essence then, the VC is appointed as the chief executive officer (CEO) of the university, and is held to account by the council.

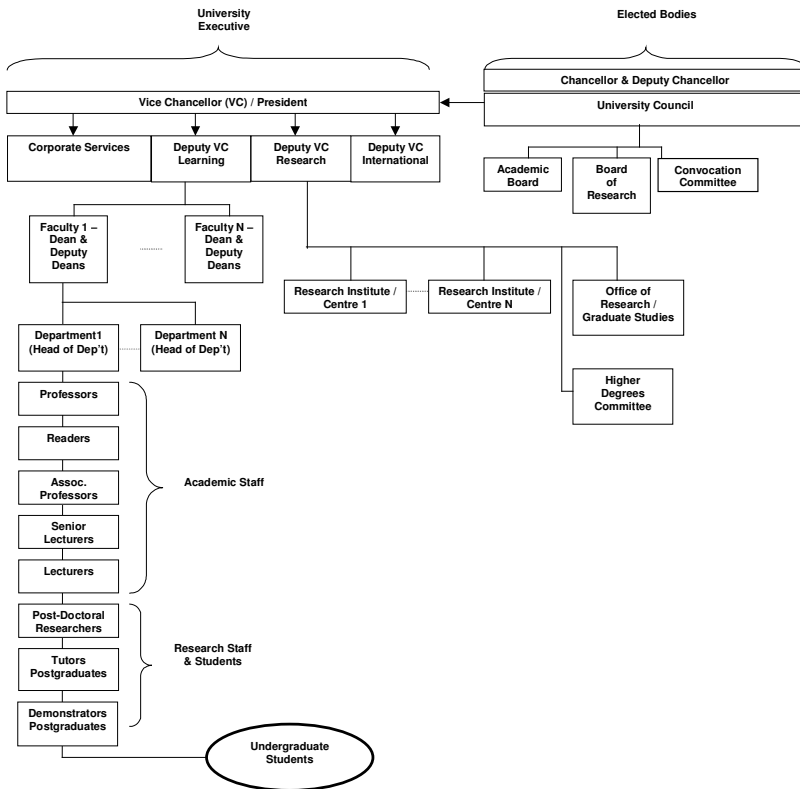


Figure 3.1 – Basic Academic Elements of a Typical Australian University and Their Relationship to Undergraduate Students

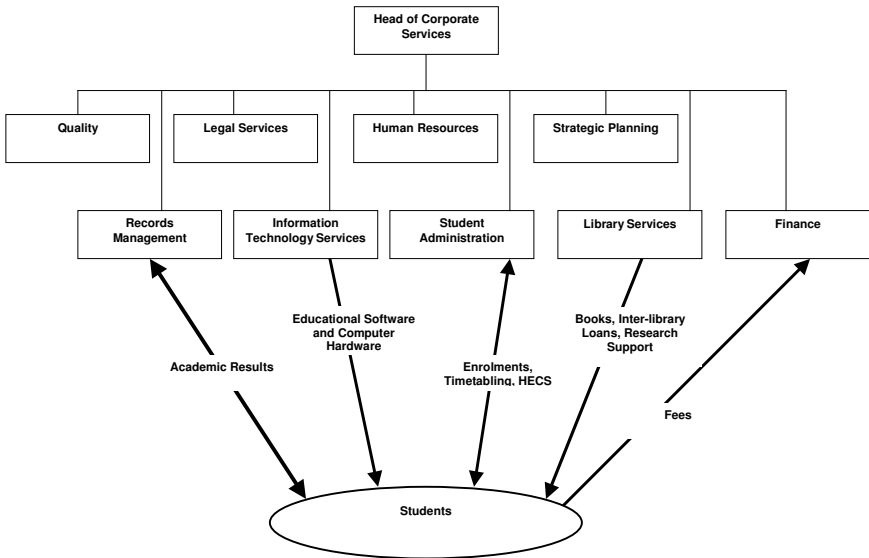


Figure 3.2 – Typical Corporate Services and Their Relationship to Undergraduate Students

In looking more closely at Figure 3.1, we can now explore the roles of each of the various academic elements that make up the core education and research functions of the university. Specifically:

(i) *The University Council*

The council is the governing body of the university and its role in all Australian universities is enshrined in the Act

that establishes each particular university. A university council is a high-level decision making body, generally focusing on major decisions that affect the image and ethos of the university. A university council is typically composed of members appointed by the relevant government (either state or federal depending on the Act of Establishment); members representing various interests in the university (e.g., academic or administrative staff, and student representatives); and numerous others, as specified in the university's Act of Establishment. Ultimately, all major strategic decisions relating to the function of a university need to be considered and approved by council, although vice chancellors generally have discretion on operational matters. In other words, a university council delegates some of its authority to the vice chancellor in order to make day to day decision making practical.

The members of a university council normally undertake their roles on a voluntary basis, although in some universities they are paid a fee for their participation in council meetings. For this reason, and because many council members have careers outside the university, they clearly do not have time to delve into all the operational issues that take place within the university – hence, a university council needs to rely upon reports and recommendations from chancellery, as well as those from the elected boards and committees that report back to council on a regular basis.

It is generally the case that a university council needs to receive feedback on issues that relate to education, research

conduct and performance, and these come back through other elected/representative committees such as the academic board or board of research. It is also the case in some universities, particularly the older ones, that council likes to receive feedback from former stakeholders in the university – in other words, those who have graduated from the university and generally have careers elsewhere. In such instances, the university has what is referred to as a “committee of convocation” which is established to provide feedback to council from alumnists who maintain a general interest in the directions of the university.

Another committee which is generally formed to provide independent feedback to council is the “finance committee” of the university – the objective of such a committee is to provide an independent check on university funds and cash-flow. In some cases, university turnover is well in excess of a billion dollars per annum (even smaller universities turn over several hundred million dollars per annum) so there need to be multiple checks on financial processes – the council has an important role here as the last internal bastion of accountability for financial management. The chancellor and finance committee of a university also have an external accountability to auditors in government – typically, the auditor general.

As far as undergraduate students are concerned, it is worth noting that most universities have a student representative present at the highest level of decision making in the university. Hence, when there are issues that

undergraduate students wish to bring to the attention of the university, and when these are strategic in nature, then there is opportunity for students to approach the student representative on council to have these considered. Students need to learn to use their representatives on council to ensure that their voices are heard on matters of relevance to them.

(ii) *University Divisions*

Although not shown in Figure 3.1, it is sometimes the case that universities divide their operations across campuses or across a range of educational entities. For example, some universities inherit a smaller tertiary institution and wish to preserve its identity and existing system of rules and procedures, without changing those of the parent university. Another example would be when a university establishes an off-shore campus and wishes to maintain it as a discrete unit. Sometimes this occurs so that different rules can be followed in line with the local regulations where the off-shore campus is established, or in case the operation goes bankrupt or otherwise damages the main university's brand value. In these instances, the university generally creates a "division" which allows the sub-entity to report back to chancellery and to council as though it were a separate organisation – then if the division is closed or disestablished, there is no need to change the broader structure of the university.

The notion of university divisions does not generally impact upon undergraduate students unless they are

undertaking studies in a division which falls outside the mainstream of the university – for example, at an international campus. In such a case, it may be that students are bound by a different set of rules or academic standards than would apply to the central university.

(iii) *The Chancellery*

Chancellery is the core executive/management element of the university and has responsibility for all academic and corporate/administrative matters. Chancellery has a number of components, as shown in Figure 3.3. In this diagram it is clear that chancellery has a management or executive component, and a ceremonial/official component. The chancellor and deputy chancellor of a university are typically not employees of the university, and are there to lead the university council. They also have a role as the official signatories for the degrees and diplomas conferred by the university. In practice, it is the chancellor or his deputy who approve the conferring of awards. A chancellor typically also presides over graduation in a ceremonial role.

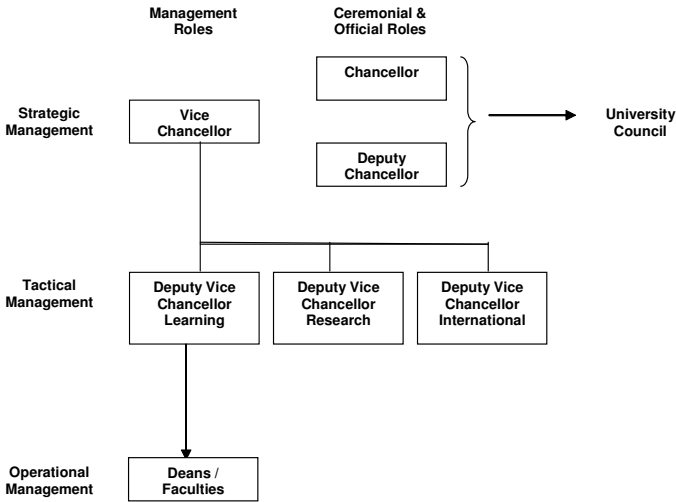


Figure 3.3 – Overview of Chancellery

The major component of university operations, both academic and corporate/administrative, are led by the vice chancellor, who is the CEO of the university. The VC is sometimes also given the title of university president in line with North American nomenclature. The VC’s role is in strategic leadership. That is, setting the future academic and administrative directions of the university. Typically, a VC may be involved in the development of plans and strategies to move the university forward and position it competitively over the period of the upcoming decade. In practice, a VC is the human face of the university that is put forward in government and media. The VC also has a role in lobbying the

Federal Government for funding, and gets involved in some of the day to day activities of the university (particularly resolution of disputes and other matters that cannot be remedied at a lower level) – however, his/her role is generally concerned with longer term issues.

Once the VC decides upon a particular direction and objectives for a university over the long term, it is clearly necessary to have plans in place to achieve those objectives. These are the “tactics” that are used to convert ideas into something that can be implemented. This role generally falls upon the deputy vice chancellors (DVCs) of the university. In most universities there are at least three DVCs (in learning, research and international) but some universities have more, to cover other areas of interest. In some cases, where universities have divisions, a DVC can be appointed specifically to run a particular division – such as an offshore campus.

It is also the case that in some universities, tactical management positions are covered by pro-vice chancellors (PVCs). The difference between the title of DVC and PVC is somewhat blurred and ambiguous but it is normally the practice that a DVC is the more senior of the two – perhaps because of a larger portfolio under management.

The DVCs (or PVCs) pass their tactical plans out of chancellery and down to the various deans that run university faculties. The deans then have an operational management role in the university – in other words, they have to translate tactical ideas into operational practice by making “day to day”

management decisions – which courses to run; how to staff courses, which subjects to run, and so on.

In summary, therefore, the VC's role is to set the big picture for the university and to sell it to the stakeholders so that the organisation as a whole is seen to be moving in the same direction. The role of the DVCs is to take the big picture and convert it into a collection of enabling plans that explain how the big picture will come about. The role of the deans is then to organise day to day operations at faculty level so that all the staff have short term (e.g., one to three year) targets and directions that help to achieve the tactical plans.

As far as undergraduate students are concerned, the role of the VC is such that the "buck" stops at his/her office – so, if there are any problems that arise that cannot be resolved elsewhere, it is the role of the VC, as the chief executive of the university, to intervene and find a path forward. As a general rule, contacting a VC to resolve a problem would be an action of last resort, after having dealt with academics, administrative staff, heads of department, the relevant dean and/or DVC. Clearly, with universities having between 10,000 and 60,000 students, it would not be possible for a VC to deal with all issues personally.

As a basic principle of good management, if an issue is brought to the attention of the VC prior to having passed through the lower level resolution mechanisms, then it would be the role of the VC's assistants to direct the issue downwards, for clarification or investigation, before submitting it for consideration by the VC.

(iv) *The Academic Board and its Committees*

The most important function of a university is education, and so its integrity and quality need to be ensured through a range of mechanisms. The first of these is the normal process of management through chancellery and the faculties. The second is through an elected board which is representative of educational functions across the university – this is typically referred to as the academic board of the university. An academic board, as its name implies, is composed of statutory and elected members with a specific interest in maintaining academic standards and propriety. These may include deans; professors; heads of departments; heads of research institutes; student and staff representatives, and sometimes industry representatives.

Although not a widely visible component of the university system, the academic board is arguably the most important elected body in the university. Its role is to monitor and challenge the operations of the executive in regard to educational matters, and to monitor educational standards and courses developed by various departments, faculties and institutes. The academic board of a university can have numerous subcommittees and sometimes other boards. For example, the higher degrees committee (HDC) of a university (which is responsible for regulating postgraduate research degrees) may report to the academic board. The board of research in a university, which is responsible for monitoring strategic research directions and relative performance may

also report to academic board (although in some universities, the board of research can also report directly to council).

In general, although an academic board has student representatives, most undergraduate students have no requirement to deal directly with it. The reason being that an academic board does not generally concern itself with issues related to specific students but, rather, to issues related to overall student performance. There may be incidents, however, where a large group of students (i.e., a class) feels that their academic progress has been impeded or damaged by some phenomenon which can be remedied at academic board level. Another example that may be of interest to an academic board is where students feel that the quality of a course or subject is poor and needs to be rectified. In these instances, students can have the issue raised through their representatives on the academic board. Alternatively, they can take the matter directly to their student representative on the university council.

(v) *The Committee of Convocation*

Some universities, particularly the long established ones, maintain what is referred to as a committee of convocation. Essentially, this is a committee that is composed of former graduates of the university who have an interest in providing an input to the directions of the university. Typically, the committee could be composed of industrialists, practising lawyers and medical professionals, professional

engineers and scientists, and so on. The objective of such a committee is to bring to the attention of the university the views of the broader community as they relate to education and research. A committee of convocation would normally report back to the university council.

In some universities, the committee of convocation has a member enshrined in the faculty board of each faculty in the university. This enables the committee to get a firsthand understanding of what happens within faculties, and to report to council impressions of how this relates to the outside world.

Students generally have little to do with the committee of convocation until after they graduate.

(vi) *The Faculties and Deans*

The faculties of a university are the largest units of learning and research that relate to particular disciplines – for example, medicine, law, engineering, economics, arts, etc.

The head of a faculty is normally referred to as the dean, and a dean, like a VC, has deputies to assist in the operational requirements of the faculty. Typically, faculties have deputy deans for education, research and internationalisation. Some have additional deputies for industry interaction, and so on. In addition to the dean and deputy deans, faculties generally have a collection of administrative staff who deal with day to day requirements, as they pertain specifically to the faculty. For example, faculties have administrative staff who are

involved in issues related to undergraduate courses, examinations, etc.

In the context of the university, the role of the dean is largely an operational one – generally concerned with short/medium term issues related to students and research currently within the system. However, some faculties are quite complex entities, particularly in the case of areas such as medicine, engineering and law. In these cases, faculties not only have to undertake teaching and research activities, but also have to interact with outside entities, such as teaching hospitals, industry and the judicial/court system.

Within a faculty, there are a number of basic activities. The most important of these relates to the education and learning processes associated with undergraduate students. Even a small/medium faculty in Australia can have several thousand undergraduate students, whose learning, examination and day to day issues need to be dealt with. In addition to undergraduate learning, a faculty is also responsible for research – this means that the faculty has to deal with Master's and PhD candidates, and also postdoctoral researchers. Faculties also have to contend with visiting academics who are conducting research.

In the context of research, much of the funding is derived from the Federal Government through competitive research grants, so a faculty needs to monitor its performance in winning and managing such grants. Faculties may also have consulting, contract research and other arrangements in

place with outside partners (such as industry) and these relationships also need to be managed.

In general, a faculty is composed of a number of functional groups or departments, in order to make it easier to manage. For example, in engineering, a faculty would be composed of smaller departmental groups, such as Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering. Some faculties also have other functional groups, such as research centres or research institutes. All of these groups and departments are given some degree of autonomy and budget, but all are ultimately the responsibility of the dean and deputy deans.

In the context of undergraduate students, the bulk of their dealings with a university are either through their department, within the faculty, or with the faculty management. These entities generally have mechanisms available to support and advise students, and mechanisms to enable students to dispute issues of unfairness, and so on. In general, it would be unusual for issues relating to individual students to become so severe that they need to be taken outside a faculty for resolution but, if such issues arise, students should not be deterred from moving up the organisational ladder to voice concerns.

(vii) *Departments and Schools*

Departments and schools, within faculties, are normally established around specific disciplines – for example, dentistry

or chemical engineering or physics. They also tend to be established around specific undergraduate teaching programs – for example a Bachelor of Science in Physics, or a Bachelor of Engineering (Chemical). In practice the terms “department” and “school” appear to be used interchangeably although it is often the case that the term “school” is used to denote a larger version of a department (i.e., mini-faculty) that operates several disciplines – for example, “The School of Business and Accounting”.

Typically, a department or school generally operates one or two undergraduate courses; perhaps a postgraduate course, and some postgraduate and professional research activities. All of these are normally confined to a limited band of expertise. The academic staff and researchers within a department or school are then recruited in line with the requirements of the activities.

(viii) Research Institutes and Centres

For various reasons, including concentration of research effort; marketing; government research funding, etc., universities sometimes create research centres or institutes whose purpose is to conduct research and train postgraduate researchers, rather than to educate undergraduates. A centre is generally a small group of researchers and academics (say up to ten) who have an interest in a specific field. Many centres are not physical entities with their own buildings and staff – rather, they are a collection of departmental academics

and researchers who work in an area of common interest. Research institutes, on the other hand, tend to be larger organisations, sometimes with their own buildings and their own research and administrative staff.

Smaller centres and institutes tend to be operated by (and within) departments and faculties. In some cases, notably the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne, the entity is so large that it even sits outside a normal university structure.

There is no hard and fast formula that specifies what a centre or research institute actually is – each university has procedures and protocols which define what these terms actually mean within their organisation.

Undergraduate students generally don't interact with centres or institutes in their early years of study. However, as they progress through their courses, and become more specialised, the centres and institutes become more important to their learning. In the final year of their undergraduate studies, many students undertake research for minor and major theses by working with researchers in affiliated centres and institutes.

(ix) *Corporate Services and Administration*

One of the single largest cost (overhead) areas of a modern university pertains to corporate services and administration. There are many departments and structures that fit into this area, and they provide services such as finance

and accounting; student records management; student enrolment management; quality processes; information technology; library and educational software; printing; examination services; timetabling; student support services; facilities maintenance, and so on.

Each university has its own way of structuring corporate and administrative services but, in simple terms, some of these are centralised (e.g., finance, student records management), and some are distributed through faculties and departments (student enrolments, timetabling, etc.). The degree to which centralisation or distribution of these supporting systems occurs depends on how a particular university best sees service delivery taking place.

Most undergraduate students will end up dealing with various administrative facets of the university at some stage – commencing with enrolments and timetabling; through to course and subject advice; right through to organising collection of their degree and attendance at their own graduation ceremony.

- (x) *Academic staff – Professors, Readers, Associate Professors, Senior Lecturers, Lecturers, Postdoctoral Researchers, Tutors and Demonstrators*

Universities have a wide range of academic positions, and most, if not all, of these interact with undergraduate students at some stage of their study.

At the top end of the academic scale is the professor. A professor is supposed to be an internationally recognised figure in research and learning. In more recent years, the term professor also carries with it a requirement that the incumbent is able to generate sufficient external funds to support a team of researchers – so, in practice, a professor is also a manager of research, rather than a pure researcher.

Traditional universities preserve the title of “reader”, which refers to a person who (as the name implies) is a scholar of renown in a particular field of research. In some universities, the term reader carries with it more prestige than the term professor because a reader is generally unsullied by the requirement to be a financial and people manager. A reader then is the classic scholar and educator.

An associate professor is generally a person of national prominence in a particular field. Essentially, an associate professor has a similar set of duties to a professor, except that there is an expectation that the scale of research in which an associate professor is involved would be smaller than that of a full professor.

Senior lecturers and lecturers are the staff that undergraduate students will see most frequently within the university system. They form the core of undergraduate lecturing and study and, in most departments, would constitute the major component of the academic staffing. Compared to professors, readers and associate professors, senior lecturers and lecturers have a lower proportion of their time spent on

research and a higher proportion of their time spent on education, particularly at undergraduate level.

Postdoctoral researchers, as their title implies, are researchers who have completed a PhD and are undertaking research in a particular field. Generally, postdoctoral researchers are funded by specific grants held by professors and associate professors, and so are contract staff, generally remaining with a university for only a few years before either moving on or being inducted into lectureships or senior lectureships. Postdoctoral researchers sometimes give lectures in their fields of specialisation, so undergraduate students tend to encounter them in their later years of study, rather than in the early ones.

Traditional universities tend to employ academics to be full-time tutors – in other words, people devoted to supporting undergraduate students. In general, tutors tend to be of a similar age to undergraduate students, and the objective is to provide a personal mentor relationship to support students. Many undergraduate students naturally bond with their colleagues as soon as they enter into the university system but, for those who don't, the relationship between a tutor and an undergraduate student can be an important one. Unlike senior academics, tutors are less intimidating; can be more sympathetic; more in line with student thought processes and problems, and so on.

The majority of tutors and laboratory demonstrators in universities are not, however, full-time staff. These positions are usually sessional (part-time) positions that are given to

postgraduate research students who are undertaking Master's or PhD studies at the university. As such, the bulk of tutors and demonstrators are only marginally older than the undergraduate students that they support, and so they can offer a much more personable face to the university. Many undergraduate students enjoy the experience of having demonstrators and tutors both as colleagues and as mentors. The relationship is more akin to a friendship than to a formal master/apprentice hierarchy.

Undergraduate students should make use of all levels of academic staff during their studies but, in particular, should seek to get as much support as possible from tutors and demonstrators, where they can feel uninhibited in terms of asking questions and describing problems that they are having with their studies.

Having witnessed how sophisticated the university governance system is in Australia, one may well conclude that it is very robust and difficult to distort. However, this is not the case. The governance systems in Australian universities are actually very fragile and, in the absence of checks and balances, are susceptible to distortion from senior officeholders, so vigilance is required to avoid degradation of the system.

The weak point in the governance of Australian universities is in the way in which university councils are constituted. In principle, the composition of university councils, as described in (i) above, is

very well considered and sound, and provides a complete representation of the various facets and stakeholders of the university. In practice, however, it is difficult for modern councils to be entirely objective and independent, and to challenge the executive – which is a key factor in avoiding distortion of the system.

An inherent weakness in the constitution of councils is that few members of a university council actually have a formal, vested interest in the betterment of the university, even though councillors in general, and in good faith, seek to have their university develop and improve in stature. There is technically no formal loss or penalty applied to councillors if the executive or university fail to perform or, in the worst case, the university ceases to exist altogether. In other words, for some councillors, there are no personal ramifications to decisions made by council. This is quite a different situation to industry, where the board members of a company potentially lose money (or fail to make a profit) if the company they steer does not perform – in other words, every decision ultimately has a personal ramification.

The members of council who do have formal, vested interests in the betterment of the university are the representatives of the legislating government that controls the university; the academic and administrative staff representatives, and the student representatives.

The government representatives on council are a genuine vested interest group, albeit with political allegiances. Nevertheless, they can assert, on council, issues of relevance to the elected government of the day. The fact that these representatives are not employees of the university means that they can speak

independently of the executive and, if necessary, in contradiction to it.

The academic and administrative staff representatives on council are also genuine vested interest groups whose future is tied in with the betterment of the university. In particular, academic staff representatives on council are pivotal to ensuring the integrity of the university, and raising issues that directly impact upon learning and research. However, in modern university practice, it is difficult (if not entirely impractical) for such representatives to voice their views independently and without prejudice.

In the past, when academic staff were tenured for life, they could express their views in the knowledge that there were no adverse consequences to be had for expressing them. However, as the nature of tenure eroded with modern business employment practices, it led to a fundamental change in the nature of university governance. After the abolition of tenure, the academic staff on council, who had a responsibility to question the university executive, and bring to light issues that could sometimes be unfavourable to the executive, had become, in practice, direct employees of the executive. In some cases, the academic staff on council were on limited term contracts that could only be renewed by the executive.

The issue of university council independence goes back to the difficulty of superimposing modern practices onto a system whose core elements were founded centuries ago. The net result of retaining a traditional council structure, which does not take into consideration the elimination of tenure, has been the creation of a system where checks and balances on the executive have been

diminished. A number of the major university failures of the 1990s and early 21st Century have, in fact, been formally attributed to the lack of oversight provided by councils over the executive arm of the university.

In older universities, it was also the case that the majority of councillors were alumni of the university, and therefore had a genuine personal interest in its success. In a modern university, however, it is altogether possible to have the majority (or even entirety) of the council composed of people who have never studied at that university – in other words, to have an organisation run by people who have neither emotional, political nor financial attachment to its future.

It is therefore at council level that students have their most important role to play, in ensuring the integrity of the executive, and in making sure that accurate operational information is received by the council. When people study in Australian universities, they need to understand that the student representatives on council are not merely token elements – in the modern university governance system, they have been bequeathed an important role in challenging the executive and its performance. This is fundamental to maintaining the integrity of the Australian university system and to preserving educational values. Students, as individuals or in groups, should consider playing an active role in debate in the council by contacting their student representative, and ensuring that issues of importance are heard at the highest level of the university. It is here, more than at any other level, that students can leave a legacy for their successors by improving upon what exists, and ensuring that what is important is not lost, eroded or distorted.

Chapter 3 Summary:

- (i) *Each Australian university has governance in accordance with its Act of Establishment*
- (ii) *The Act of Establishment specifies that the university is run by a combination of an executive body (chancellery) and an elected body (council) – each of these has its own sub-levels and committees.*
- (iii) *Chancellery is composed of an executive/management group and a ceremonial/official group. The executive group runs all aspects of the university, including educational, research and corporate functions.*
- (iv) *The VC is responsible for strategy; the DVCs for tactics and the faculty deans for operational level management of the system*
- (v) *Most undergraduate students will interact with the system through their department or faculty.*
- (vi) *Undergraduate students have an important role to play in ensuring the integrity of the system by active participation in (or contribution to) the university council.*