



Charles Sturt
University

Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers

3 March 2025

Office of the Vice-Chancellor
Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt University - TEQSA Provider Identification: PRV12018 (Australian University). CRICOS Provider: 00005F.



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Senator Tony Sheldon
Chair, Education and Employment Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Sheldon

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into quality of governance at Australian higher education providers

Charles Sturt University is grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to provide information to this inquiry.

The inquiry comes at a time when government, universities and stakeholders should be working together to turn the Australian Universities Accord into a model for a sustainable, responsive, inclusive and effective higher education system.

Charles Sturt University is driven by our mission to expand access to higher education – the main goal of the Accord – and to support our communities, especially in regional Australia, to benefit from the research we do and the skilled graduates we produce to meet social and economic needs. We act with integrity and with high standards of governance. Students welcome the care we take to focus on their wellbeing and to support their success in their chosen degrees.

Every year we graduate over 7,000 students with degrees in health care, agriculture, veterinary science, environmental science, engineering, IT, accounting, social work and many other vital skills, and who go on to provide these skills to Australian communities, particularly in regional Australia. With the majority of our students being the first in their families to attend university, we are providing opportunity for individuals and economic growth for communities.

But we do all this in the face of significant hurdles. For example, we provide many courses that are critical to skills shortages nationwide, and especially in regional areas – nursing, allied health, teacher education, veterinary sciences – but they cost more to deliver than we receive in public funding. We offer them nonetheless, to meet community needs and student demand, and as part of our mission to serve the public good. The gap between public funding and delivery costs for these courses has grown steadily due to rising costs and decades of underfunding by almost any metric, especially funding per student. The situation was exacerbated by the ill-conceived and inequitable Job-Ready Graduates funding model, which also makes it increasingly difficult to provide the level of academic and pastoral support that our students need and deserve.

No proper recognition has ever been given in higher education funding models to the higher costs and lack of economies of scale that hamper regional universities' ability to fund all the needs of a



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modern university. This fact underpins many of the higher education issues currently being examined and debated, including the governance of universities.

Charles Sturt University is very willing to demonstrate the significant and appropriate effort we put into ensuring high quality governance and management – as we do in annual reporting to the NSW Parliament and the Australian Government's Department of Education, as well as our work with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Universities must of course be well governed, well managed and effectively regulated. We welcome those expectations, and this submission sets out the ways in which we discharge our responsibilities to our students, our communities, the taxpayers who fund much of our activity, and sector regulators. But it also calls for a more balanced debate about the drivers of university performance.

We are frequently disappointed to see that public and political debate on higher education policy and funding consists almost entirely of criticism of universities, often blaming (and punishing) them for problems they did not create, such as high immigration numbers, high housing costs, or the proliferation of poor quality private higher education providers. These criticisms ignore the truism that, by their nature and mission universities are a key part of the solution to social and economic challenges, a role that includes fostering the kind of open discourse and rigorous inquiry that would help our society to reduce the damaging effects of polarisation and misinformation.

We recognise there have been legitimate concerns about areas where universities could do better, and have indeed increased our standards of transparency, student support, and employee relations. However, we also seek to provide a more balanced and accurate explanation of the underlying causes of problematic issues. Unless there is an accurate focus on what causes issues, policy makers will not be effective in addressing them.

For example, universities have been pilloried in recent years for relying on international student revenue. That reliance has been the express policy position of successive federal governments, who have been able to avoid over \$10b per annum of public funding to the higher education sector by expecting universities to fill the funding gap with fee-paying students. Universities did not choose this policy. We have effectively responded to it. We are equally willing to pivot away from it if this no longer suits the migration policies of government, but politicians and policy-makers must accept that governments will then have to either fill the funding gap or accept a major reduction in the quantity and quality of both education and research.

Rather than focus on isolated elements of the complex landscape for higher education in Australia, such as international student numbers, the attention of policy-makers and governments should be on the critical strategic policy and funding decisions that must be taken if universities, especially regional universities, are to survive and thrive for the benefit of the nation. Universities must of course be well governed, well managed and effectively regulated. We welcome those expectations, and this submission sets out how we meet them.

At the [2021 AFR Higher Education Summit](#) the then Shadow Minister for Education, the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, announced the ALP's plans for an Australian Universities Accord with a promise to tackle

big questions ... about how higher education is structured and funded – so that it can keep offering affordable, high quality teaching, and produce world class research – and so that knowledge translates to prosperity and jobs. We must look at the whole system rather than tinkering around the edges if we want to make sure we have the educated workforce necessary to drive economic growth.



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Unfortunately, after extensive consultations, two Accord reports, and a year to act on the final recommendations, the big questions remain unaddressed. Important and obvious reforms, like reversing the damage caused by the Job-ready Graduates scheme, have been postponed pending advice from a body that does not yet exist, or deferred past any point that their implementation could be helpful.

Decades of underfunding have left many public universities struggling to perform the core functions to the standard required of them. Universities are expected and required to teach and carry out research in a range of disciplines, engage with industry and the community, help their students and staff achieve their education and career goals, maintain and upgrade essential facilities, build new ones to meet evolving education and research needs, and serve as major centres of cultural, social and economic activity.

None of these public good activities are fully funded by government. Nor does funding from the private sector and other sources complete cover the costs of the activities it is intended to support. Yet the steps universities have been compelled to take to cope with the inadequate funding environment – reducing costs, casualising the workforce, increasing class sizes, recruiting fee-paying international students – have become the basis of criticism of the universities, ignoring the root problem. Other issues, like executive remuneration, internal policies and practices, what and how universities teach and research, and how they are governed attract more attention than the ‘big question’ of how to ensure the financial viability and sustainability of this vital sector.

Diverting attention from the true problems facing higher education in Australia has enabled governments to give the appearance of acting to improve higher education by increasing regulation, undermining autonomy, and prescribing how universities are to operate. The resulting selective micro-management does little to address the true drivers of student success and national research output and further hampers the ability of universities to do the critical work of education, research, and student support within inadequate resources.

As the attached submission will demonstrate, the governance arrangements for Charles Sturt University are robust and high-quality, as are the regulation and oversight applied to them. We contend that TEQSA’s powers on these matters are appropriate for the current regulatory and legislative framework and can adapt to meet evolving expectations of government and the community – provided those expectations are realistic and support the principle that universities are autonomous, self-governing institutions, not government agencies. We urge the Committee to recognise this truth and recommend that the Government, rather than rush to more regulation, act on the core funding and policy issues affecting the ability of universities like Charles Sturt to fulfill the aspirations of Australia and its people.

I would be happy to provide the Committee with more information on any of the topics raised in the submission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Renée Leon".

Professor Renée Leon PSM
Vice-Chancellor and President



Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into quality of governance at Australian higher education providers

About Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt is Australia's largest regional university. We are a unique multi-campus institution with campuses in some of New South Wales' most vibrant regional communities: Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Canberra, Dubbo, Goulburn, Orange, Port Macquarie, and Wagga Wagga. All have strong connections to surrounding rural and remote communities. Charles Sturt is one of only a handful of genuinely multi-campus universities in Australia – that is, universities that have operated since their foundation across multiple locations. Our geographical footprint is exceeded only by one other regional university, although unlike other multi-campus institutions Charles Sturt is required by state legislation to have 'major campuses' in specific locations: Albury, Bathurst, Dubbo, and Wagga Wagga.

In 2023 the University had almost 35,000 students and more than 2,100 full time equivalent staff. For context, those numbers mean that Charles Sturt has significantly more students and staff than other regional universities. In terms of student numbers, Charles Sturt is roughly equivalent in size to the University of Newcastle, La Trobe University, or the University of South Australia; by staff numbers we are comparable to the University of Tasmania, Australian Catholic University, or Flinders University.

According to Department of Education finance data, Charles Sturt University's total revenue in 2022 of more than \$443 million was larger than that of most other regional universities, the exception being James Cook. In terms of revenue, Charles Sturt University is on par with Victoria University and Edith Cowan University, but lower than the revenues of universities with similar student populations or the median for the public higher education sector. The difference in revenue between Charles Sturt University and others of similar size is a reflection of several factors: different course and student mixes; a high proportion of online and part-time students; the current funding arrangements for university teaching, learning and research; and having significantly fewer fee-paying international students than metropolitan universities.

In sum, Charles Sturt University is, in Australian terms, a mid-size university by most measures. What makes Charles Sturt different to other mid-size universities is that it is based in and conducts almost all of its operations in regional Australia – indeed, we are required to do so by our founding legislation. These basic characteristics – size, geography, and regional identity – make Charles Sturt University unique in the Australian higher education system.

What these statistics do not reveal, however, is the University's important role in the economy of regional NSW and its contribution to regional, state and national goals in education, health, economic and community development, employment and productivity, and, increasingly, energy transition and adaptation to climate change.



The governance of Australian universities

Australia's first universities were established with the expectation that they would provide the colonies, not yet a nation, with knowledgeable and skilled workers in professions like medicine, law and education, though even from the outset they offered generalist degrees, such as Bachelors of Science or Arts, that were not part of a pathway to a particular career but were valued nonetheless. Meeting workforce needs is still an important part of many universities' mission and identity – more so for regional universities like Charles Sturt, which have a close relationship with the communities they serve.

Inevitably, expectations of the nations' universities have evolved since the mid-1800s. They are now established, managed and required, first and foremost, to encourage the creation and transmission of new knowledge and ideas. This goal is captured in the *Charles Sturt University Act*, which charges the University with

the dissemination, advancement, development and application of knowledge informed by free inquiry ... the provision of courses of study or instruction across a range of fields, and the carrying out of research, to meet the needs of the community ... [and] participation in public discourse

Achieving these goals requires adherence to principles like freedom of academic inquiry and freedom of academic expression ("free inquiry"), principles which extend to how new knowledge is transmitted and the discussion of potentially contentious ideas or the articulation of discomfiting opinions ("participation in public discourse"). These principles mean that universities must, of necessity, have the autonomy to decide what they inquire into and how, what they teach and how, to meet their obligations under law but also to suit their circumstances and the needs of their students and stakeholders. The latter means that there must be some variation in governance arrangements to suit institutional differences and to encourage innovation. This in turn leads to institutional diversity and a resilient higher education system better able to meet the needs of students, communities, industry and the nation as a whole.

The governance arrangements required on institutions with university status are set out in the [Higher Education Standards Framework](#) (HESF)¹. The Framework is managed by the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP), an expert statutory advisory body established under the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011*. The standards determined by the HESP are legislated by the Government and given expression in regulations managed by TEQSA.

Domain 6 of the HESF sets out detailed standards for governance, such as ensuring the governing body is constituted by a legal instrument, that members of the governing body are fit and proper persons, and how the governing body must assure itself of proper corporate management and academic quality oversight. The standards require periodic independent reviews of the effectiveness of the governance, which TEQSA can scrutinise. The associated guidance from TEQSA says that Domain 6 sits on top of all of the others, as good governance assures that all other requirements of the HESF can be met.

¹ Over the past 20 years changes to the composition of university governing bodies have for the most part come about as the result of decisions by government about how universities should be run, rather than to correct any deficiencies in governance.



The current regulatory arrangements are intended to achieve the high-level policy outcomes of quality teaching and research and effective operation in a competitive market². The role of TEQSA, as the main regulator, is geared to those outcomes, and to the overarching principle of institutional autonomy: in setting and monitoring standards TEQSA expects universities to organise themselves and be accountable to their governing bodies for how they achieve the required standards.

That said, we can reassure the committee that TEQSA does in fact scrutinise universities very closely about their governance. Charles Sturt University's most recent submission to TEQSA for re-registration required detailed assessment and analysis of every policy and practice that supports education, student wellbeing, research, and governance, including providing evidence to TEQSA of the operation of all of these arrangements for TEQSA's scrutiny. Compiling the required information took more than 12 months, and the assessment by TEQSA took another eighteen months (and included two requests for information).

TEQSA's regulation of the sector appropriately considers how governance systems are designed and operate. But TEQSA is not and should not be equated with the governing body of the institution itself and does not make specific decisions that, properly, fall to appropriately constituted governing bodies. Where specific issues arise, TEQSA will contact a provider to ask how the governing body assured itself that the relevant standard was being met regarding the matter, will scrutinise the institution's justification behind its systems and decisions, and recommend actions to improve processes where necessary.

This approach to standard-setting, monitoring and evaluation is a strength of the current regulatory arrangements for universities. TEQSA's role, by definition, is *qualitative* evaluation of higher education providers' policies, procedures, practices, courses, and governance and management. A more prescriptive framework, which seems to be the desired end of much of the current public debate about university governance in Australia, would lead to a monolithic and unresponsive system, one bogged down in mechanistic compliance and potentially subject to a high level of inappropriate regulation unsuited to each individual institution.

Already we are seeing a level of prescription being applied to universities that is at odds with the regulatory framework set out in legislation. As higher education policy expert Professor Andrew Norton said in an [article published in the Australian Financial Review on 7 February 2025](#): "... the government has introduced a range of policies ... which, whatever the other merits, are going to substantially increase costs on a substantially financially constrained sector. That has to have negative consequences." The AFR went on to spell out the scale of the problem: "These include new compliance requirements that increase red tape, a new National Student Ombudsman, which is predicting 15,000 complaints annually, rising bureaucratic costs against a background of no increase in public funding, and reductions in private funding from international students."

² The expectation that universities operate in a market means that TEQSA is not the only oversight body they need to satisfy. They are subject to almost all the same state and federal laws and regulations that apply to corporations and many public agencies – though it is important that the Committee keep in mind that universities are not corporations: they are not-for-profit organisations required to act in the public good.

The adequacy of TEQSA's powers

The composition of providers' governing bodies and the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of their functions and processes, including in relation to expenditure, risk management and conflicts of interest

Composition of the governing body

TEQSA does not prescribe the composition of providers' governing bodies. The TEQSA standards require that the governing body be constituted by a formal legal instrument, including under legislation or under the Corporations Act.

The governing body for Charles Sturt University is prescribed by State legislation. The governance arrangements set out in the [Charles Sturt University Act 1989 No 76](#) specify, *inter alia*, the size and composition of the University Council; the qualifications and experience required of its members, including student and staff representatives; and how long a Council member can serve. The Act also sets out how the Council can appoint or co-opt external members, and the provisions for Ministerial appointments to the Council.

The University Council has 17 members in total. Consistent with legislative requirements, two members are appointed by the NSW Minister, three are ex-officio, eight are external to the University, two are graduates of the University (including one external member), and there is one elected student member and two elected staff members. The Council also manages its membership to achieve as far as is practicable at least 40% of each gender, at least 50% of new appointees having connection to rural and regional areas, and at least one First Nations member. At present, the University Council has 10 female, seven male and two First Nations members.

The Council has a skills matrix to ensure that among the members there is a good balance of people with expertise and experience in higher education, financial and investment management, corporate governance, regulatory compliance, strategy, management, stakeholder engagement, relevant industries, technology, philanthropy, and other relevant skills.

Council members complete a Declaration of Material Interests annually, with the consolidated register of interests available for all Council members to view at all times. Changes to the register are updated as they occur throughout the year, including at meetings of Council and its committees, where Declarations of Interest is a standing agenda item. Council members absent themselves from discussions or decisions when necessary to manage a conflict of interest.

In addition to appointing Members with appropriate expertise and experience, the Council ensures high standards of governance by providing for all new appointments to Council to undertake Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) training on good governance principles and practice. Most complete the full Company Directors Course and attain GAICD status.

AICD courses are supplemented by professional development sessions on key strategic or governance issues held regularly with the Council. Recent examples of this include a research session with the Chief Defence Scientist, a cybersecurity session delivered by Ernst & Young (our Internal Auditor), and training for responding to Critical Incidents (facilitated by the Chief Security Officer).



The performance of the University Council is evaluated every two years by the AICD using its Governance Analysis Tool. In 2024 AICD assessed the performance of the Charles Sturt University Council as 'mature' for 'the vast majority of items' with comparisons demonstrating improvements in item ratings over time.

Effectiveness and accountability

TEQSA requires providers to have comprehensive policies and processes for corporate monitoring and accountability and has detailed standards for all elements of these expectations. TEQSA scrutinises these arrangements at periodic re-registration and, whenever it has any concern with the governance of a provider, TEQSA can and does seek information from the provider.

Charles Sturt University has a comprehensive framework for the setting of performance standards and risk appetite by the University Council and the regular monitoring of the University's performance against those expectations. There are clear KPIs aligned with the University's strategic goals, which are cascaded into operational plans and individual performance plans and are the subject of regular reporting and accountability both through tiers of management in the University and at the strategic level to University Council. The Council's Audit and Risk Committee receives regular detailed reports on emerging risks, risk mitigation, and compliance and improvement processes, including in relation to the safety and wellbeing of staff and students.

The Annual Plans for Council and its committees outline a comprehensive structure for the management reports that will be considered over the year, and the specific meeting(s) where these will occur. As a result, Council receives and interrogates regular briefings on the implementation of the University Strategy, financial matters, updates on higher education issues including policy developments, presentations on academic and research activity, and information on risks and remediation. The Council oversees matters relating to student experience and student progress; the chair of the Academic Senate is a member of Council.

The standard and accuracy of providers' financial reporting, and the effectiveness of financial safeguards and controls

HESF Standard 6.2 sets out the requirements on governing bodies for effective financial management. Providers must be able to demonstrate, and the governing body must assure itself, that the provider is operating effectively and sustainably. The Standards specifically require that the financial position, financial performance and cash flows of the entity are monitored regularly and understood, financial reporting is materially accurate, financial management meets Australian accounting standards, effective financial safeguards and controls are operating and financial statements are audited independently by a qualified auditor against Australian accounting and auditing standards.

The University Council receives regular reporting throughout the year on financial management and risk management. A full suite of financial management reports with supporting analysis are produced monthly, and include a statement of financial performance, a statement of financial position and a cash flow statement. The University undertakes longer-term financial trajectory planning annually. Financial performance is subject to detailed oversight by the Council's Finance, Investment and Infrastructure Committee which meets six times per year.



The University's financial statements are prepared in accordance with Australian Accounting Standards and are subject to external audit through the NSW Audit Office. In addition to governance requirements in its Act the University must report annually to the state Parliament, in accordance with NSW Treasury guidelines. This means our finances are examined annually by the State Auditor-General. The University is also subject to other state legislative requirements, such as the *Government Sector Finance Act 2018*, that effectively treat the University as a NSW Government agency.

TEQSA does not duplicate this oversight by separately interrogating the standard and accuracy of the University's financial reports. Appropriately, this is undertaken by skilled external auditors.

Like the majority of Australian universities Charles Sturt has posted an operating loss for the past few years, the result of rising costs, declining public funding, the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and falling revenue from international students. Unlike metropolitan universities we have not been able to offset our losses by enrolling more international students or by drawing on investments, donors and other sources. Nonetheless, we are working hard to continue to deliver the quality education and other services that our students and regional communities expect.

Providers' compliance with legislative requirements, including compliance with workplace laws and regulations

TEQSA requires that a provider and its governing body comply with the requirements of the legislation under which the provider is established and any other legislative requirements. Charles Sturt University undertakes an annual legislative compliance process. Each legislative instrument which imposes obligations on the University is assigned to a responsible manager and is subject to internal monitoring and reporting. We take these responsibilities seriously: any breaches or potential breaches are reported as they arise throughout the year to the Executive Leadership Team and the Audit and Risk Committee and where required to external agencies.

For example, in 2020, Charles Sturt University proactively initiated an independent external review into its wage compliance in response to reports of underpayment in the higher education sector. The University voluntarily disclosed the identified issues to the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) and took steps to repay all monies (including on-costs) owed to the affected current and former employees³. The review also identified instances of overpayments which also arose from misclassification of work. The University did not seek recovery of these from any past or present employees.

Throughout this process University management provided prompt reports to the Audit and Risk Committee and to University Council on the findings of the wage compliance review and has kept both the Committee and the Council updated on the comprehensive remediation process.

Thorough and independent review demonstrated there was no deliberate underpayment. Payment inaccuracies occurred because of provisions in the enterprise agreement and the underpinning awards that are complicated, difficult to implement, and often difficult to apply correctly, especially in the absence of a sophisticated HR system to record and pay on hours worked.

³ We have set aside some funds to repay the small number of former employees we were not able to locate in the recent process.



On this point, we must inform the Committee that regional universities are all struggling to maintain and upgrade our digital infrastructure in the absence of either public funding for infrastructure or sufficient scope in base funding to accrue surpluses for that purpose. The University has put in place manual processes to intercept and remediate any ongoing risks and continues to advocate at the sector level for simplification of the underlying award conditions that drive these overly-complex provisions.

TEQSA's role is to require that providers have systems in place to ensure compliance with all applicable laws. It is not TEQSA's role to regulate the operation of all of the laws that apply to providers. In relation to workplace relations laws, the Fair Work Ombudsman is the relevant regulator.

The impact of providers' employment practices, executive remuneration, and the use of external consultants, on staff, students and the quality of higher education offered

TEQSA's concern is to ensure that providers have in place the full range of appropriate policies and practices to ensure the quality of education and the care and support of students. The precise way each university will achieve this is appropriately to be determined by that university's governing body and senior management. TEQSA is not accountable for each university's budget or for its achievement of outcomes and therefore is not in a position to determine operational matters such as the employment of staff, the remuneration of senior management, or the use of consultants.

All universities are expected to meet the overall standards of higher education quality. But each university has a particular mix of students, campuses and community expectations that will shape its offerings and its operations. As outlined earlier, there are some important intrinsic and structural differences between Charles Sturt University and most other universities in Australia. We also have a very different operating environment and serve a very different student body to that at most other Australian universities, with a high proportion of online, part-time, first-in-family, First Nations and disadvantaged students. These characteristics lead to governance arrangements, policies, procedures and practices that meet the needs of our students and serve the mission, identity and character of the University – as should be the case for any other university in the country.

In relation to executive remuneration, senior management remuneration is reviewed annually by the University Council with advice and benchmarking from independent expert advisers. The Terms of Reference seek to make a link between executive remuneration and the quality of education provision. The recent debate about excessive Vice-Chancellor remuneration gives rise to the impression that universities would be financially able to offer a better quality of student experience by reducing Vice-Chancellor pay. At Charles Sturt, and at all universities, executive pay is a tiny percentage of expenditure. Even steep reductions in Vice-Chancellor remuneration would make an imperceptible difference to the budget available for education, facilities or research.

In any event, at Charles Sturt, the University Council is guided by independent remuneration advice (including from expert organisations such as Mercer and Aon Australia) that benchmarks against remuneration for CEOs of public and not-for-profit organisations of similar scale and complexity. Unlike most public sector departments, universities have long been expected to operate in many ways like businesses and are required to compete for revenue share in national and global markets: for research funding, for industry partners, for students, and for leadership – including people who can run a large, complex, customer-facing business.



Mindful of our role and identify as a regional university, at Charles Sturt we balance the expectations of government and communities, our budget, and the need for good leadership. The University's Vice-Chancellor is well-remunerated but is paid less than the heads of comparable Australian Public Service departments. If political and community sentiment concludes that this level of remuneration is still too high, the appropriate response by government might be to address this issue holistically by tackling the substantial and growing disparity between the pay of CEOs and the average worker across sectors, rather than focusing only on the manifestation of this issue in higher education.

In relation to employment practices, the University is governed by industrial relations laws, awards, and enterprise agreements. We must operate within the budget and funding arrangements provided by governments. The principal source of revenue for Charles Sturt University is Commonwealth funding for student places. That funding is allocated each year based on the variable numbers of students enrolled and the courses in which they are enrolled and incorporates a funding formula that does not cover the cost of any research allocation for teaching academics – although all universities must undertake research, and our enterprise agreements allocate substantial time to academics for research.

These funding arrangements drive universities to rely on a casual teaching workforce in order to manage within the Commonwealth funding allocated. Arguably, both students and staff would benefit from a more stable workforce with more ongoing staff if funding arrangements were modified to enable such an approach. At Charles Sturt we have been increasing the number of ongoing roles for academics in recent years as much as we are able to do, though these investments in non-casual staff are increasing the pressure on the university's budget and are not accounted for in the Commonwealth funding model.

In relation to the use of consultants, Charles Sturt manages to a tight budget and uses consultants when we do not have the necessary expertise on staff, or where it is more efficient to utilise existing market capabilities rather than build a niche capability in house. For example, we have used consultants to guide the implementation of large-scale technology projects or capital works, to provide specialist training in matters such as workplace safety, or to undertake work where independence is required such as internal audit. These choices all have a positive impact on staff and students, because they enable the university to get the expertise to provide quality services and support with value for money.

Conclusion

Charles Sturt University is committed to our mission of bringing the opportunities of higher education to regional Australia and broadening participation of equity groups in higher education. We stand by our strong management and governance arrangements as being geared to achieving those goals, despite the considerable challenge we face in the systematic underfunding of student places, of research activity, and of necessary educational infrastructure.

We are concerned that in the current environment of passionate argument rather than informed debate, there is a high risk of poor outcomes for students and communities. Policy-makers and governments will respond to the issue of the moment rather than look to the long-term needs of the higher education system and the country it serves. For almost two decades Australia's universities have been expected to manage a steady reduction in public funding for teaching, learning, student



support, research, and infrastructure with an expansion of their roles and an ever-increasing reporting burden. With the active encouragement of governments, universities responded to the financial challenge this caused by increasing their collaborations with the private sector – to an extent that is rarely acknowledged in public debate – and a highly successful venture into the international student market. In many ways Australia can be credited with creating the current global market for international students, with the UK, Canada, and other countries – even the US – seeking to replicate our success. Now this highly successful export industry has been crippled, and universities are wondering again (still) how to do everything expected of them without the funding to do it or the political will to properly support their role in delivering on national priorities.

The deficits that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, cuts to international student numbers, and chronic systemic underfunding are blamed on university management rather than the policy environment in which they must operate. The response is review after review, critical decisions deferred pending yet more advice, funding models based on flawed assumptions, promises of more money ‘but only if’, and inquiries that fail to identify causes and agree on cures.

In conclusion, Charles Sturt University recommends that the Committee: ignore the temptation of tougher regulation as a substitute for meaningful action; embrace and encourage the diversity of Australian’s universities; recognise that their flaws are far outweighed by their merits and the benefits they bring to students, communities, employers and the nation; and urge the Government to act immediately to reverse the long-term neglect of these vital national public institutions.