

Higher education: A new bureaucratic era

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Recommended Citation

Norton, A. (2025). Higher education: A new bureaucratic era. *Advancing Scholarship and Research in Higher Education*, 6(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.59197/sgzkvq66>

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Publication

Received: 22 August 2025

Accepted: 10 September 2025

Published: 28 October 2025

This is an invited article based on a HERDSA keynote address presented at the HERDSA 2025 Conference held 7-10 July in Perth, Australia.

Higher education: A new bureaucratic era

Andrew Norton

Abstract

Across a range of areas – student engagement and success, sexual misconduct and racism in university contexts, student complaints, staff payments, governance, and the allocation of student places – the Australian government is increasing higher education regulation. Often multiple rules and agencies cover the same issues. This article describes the reasons given for these interventions and outlines the changes. While in most cases the government had legitimate reasons for concern, cumulatively its policy responses represent a change in governing philosophy, away from university autonomy and towards bureaucratic control.

Keywords

Higher education regulation, National Student Ombudsman, Australian Tertiary Education Commission, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, gender-based violence, academic freedom, university autonomy

Introduction

Australia's universities are in political trouble. For a range of reasons, since the late 2010s Australian governments have lost confidence in university governance and management. As a result, higher education institutions enjoy decreasing self-management and increasing control from above. This trend will intensify as gender-based violence and racism policies become more regulated and a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission steers the provision of student places.

Historical approaches to university regulation

Universities were among the earliest public institutions established by the Australian colonies in the 1850s, first the University of Sydney followed by the University of Melbourne. In the 19th century, governments were taking on wider functions and thinking about how this should be done (Ansell & Lindvall, 2020). For universities, the then colonial governments drew on overseas models to set the relationship between universities and government. The colonial universities were legally separate from the governments that created them and self-governing.

This autonomous model was not repeated for government schools or technical institutes, which were put under the operational control of government departments. But it persisted for universities, despite grey areas between what were clearly matters for self-governing

universities and what governments could reasonably demand of institutions they created and at least partly funded. While never formalised in a legal sense, university autonomy was part of the small-c constitutional order of Australia, included in the “rules of the game” conventions and norms generally respected by politicians and bureaucrats.

As the Commonwealth took a greater financial role in supporting universities in the 1950s, the then prime minister, Robert Menzies, wanted to preserve university autonomy. He insisted on a block grant approach rather than prescribing in detail how universities should use their funds (Norton, 2024b). Later Menzies allowed more control over what Commonwealth funding was for, but through arms-length commissions: the Australian Universities Commission in his time, later the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission.

As recently as the mid-2010s this separation between universities and the government of the day seemed strong. While national regulation by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) from 2012 was in one sense a turning point towards greater regulation for public universities – which had generally been trusted by state governments to manage themselves – it preserved important aspects of the old order. TEQSA operates at arms-length from the minister. Under its legislation, TEQSA’s approach should be proportionate and risk-based. Rather than auditing university operations in detail, it uses risk indicators to decide whether or not a potential problem exists before investigating further. An early CEO was removed after demanding too much detail from higher education providers (Lee Dow & Braithwaite, 2013).

On the funding side, the 2010s were the peak period for university control over funding. From 2012 to 2017, for domestic bachelor-degree students at public universities, fixed maximum funding amounts were replaced with demand driven funding. Universities with high student demand could effectively set their own Commonwealth funding level (Norton, 2020). Universities could enrol unlimited numbers of domestic postgraduate full fee-paying students, supported by the FEE-HELP income contingent loan. There were no limits on the number of international students or the fees they could be charged. While distributed unevenly across the university sector, international student fee revenue increased rapidly in the 2010s (Norton, 2023b).

Students at risk of failure

An early change in the governing approach for higher education was triggered by a scandal in another sector, vocational education. The VET FEE-HELP scheme was intended to help students in some vocational education courses finance their education with income-contingent loans, as had operated in higher education since HECS began in 1989. The basic rules for VET FEE-HELP were a cut-and-paste from the existing FEE-HELP scheme with the name changed. It became a case study in how rules that had worked, and still work, in one sector are inappropriate for another. VET FEE-HELP was widely misused by unscrupulous operators in the vocational sector (Saccaro & Wright, 2018, pp. 2–4).

After responding only slowly to obvious problems in VET FEE-HELP, in 2017 the then Coalition government took pre-emptive action in higher education, initially only applying outside the university sector. It amended funding legislation so that non-university providers had to assess whether a student was “academically suited” for every subject they took. This created a situation in which the Department of Education regulated academic suitability for a subject while TEQSA regulated academic suitability for a course, through rules known as the Threshold Standards. It was the start of two regulators administering overlapping matters.

The 2017 legislation also created a new requirement that non-university higher education providers determine whether or not a student was “genuine” – as many of the VET FEE-HELP students had not been (some did not even know they had been enrolled) – before being eligible for Commonwealth funding or student loans. To be genuine a student needed to be “reasonably engaged” with their studies prior to a census date which triggers public funding. This is normally about a month into semester.

In 2021 these rules were extended to public universities, creating a two-agency and three-layer check on students – before admission to the course, before admission to the subject, and then before the census date.

In 2023 a Labor government introduced another layer of regulation with a “support for students” policy (*Higher Education Provider Amendment (Support for Students Policy) Guidelines 2023*). From 2024 universities must have a policy that includes information on how they determine the academic suitability of students for a subject, how they identify students at risk of failing a subject, how they provide academic support services to at-risk students, and how they provide various non-academic support services. Non-compliance with the policy puts universities at risk of fines of up to \$19,800 per student.

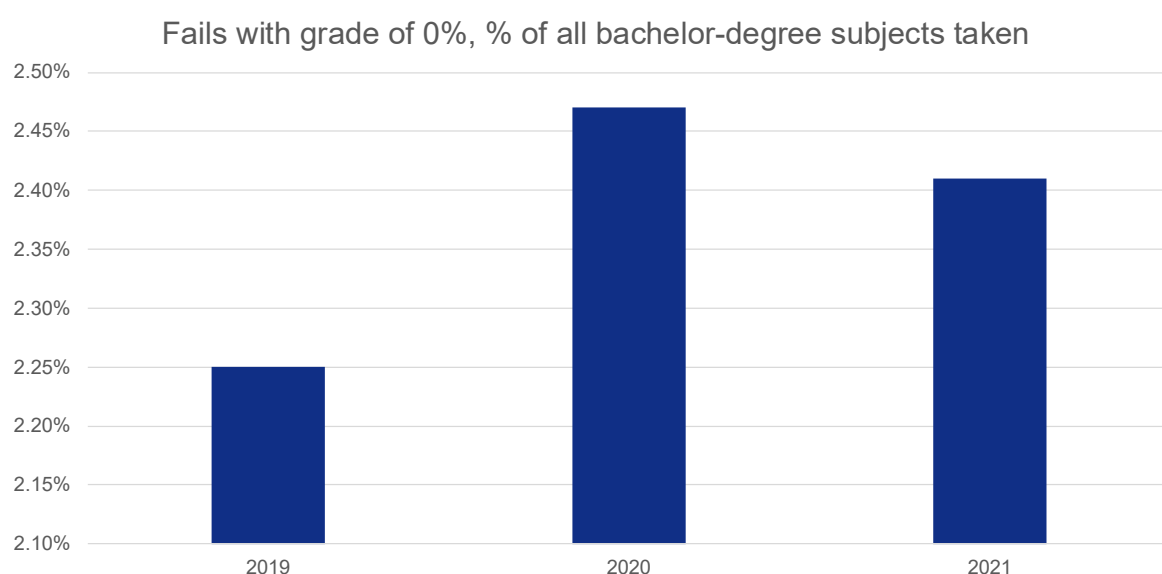
The support for students policy covers similar ground to a TEQSA-enforced Threshold Standard requiring universities to make early assessments of needs for additional support, although the standards focus on the transition into higher education rather than all students (Norton, 2023c). The support for students policy also significantly overlaps with the earlier genuine student policy, which requires universities to check that students are reasonably engaged with their studies before the census date, but with an important change of emphasis. While the genuine student policy encourages universities to cancel subject enrolments of disengaged students, the support for students policy emphasises assisting students to overcome obstacles to success.

These policies – academic suitability for courses and subjects, genuine student, support for students – address real problems. Several studies identify issues with students enrolled in subjects who show no evidence of having engaged with their studies (Ewart et al., 2025; Stephenson et al., 2021; van der Ploeg et al., 2025). Figure 1 reports results from one

university where, consistently over a three-year period, more than 2% of subjects taken received a grade of 0%, suggesting that no assessment tasks were completed. These students accrue avoidable fails on their academic records and unnecessary HELP debt. But universities now face four sets of rules, administered by two agencies, that regulate essentially the same issue of managing students at risk of failure.

Figure 1

Identifying non-genuine students? Fails with grade of 0%



Source: N van de Ploeg et al., Understanding university failure, *Higher Education Research & Development* 2024

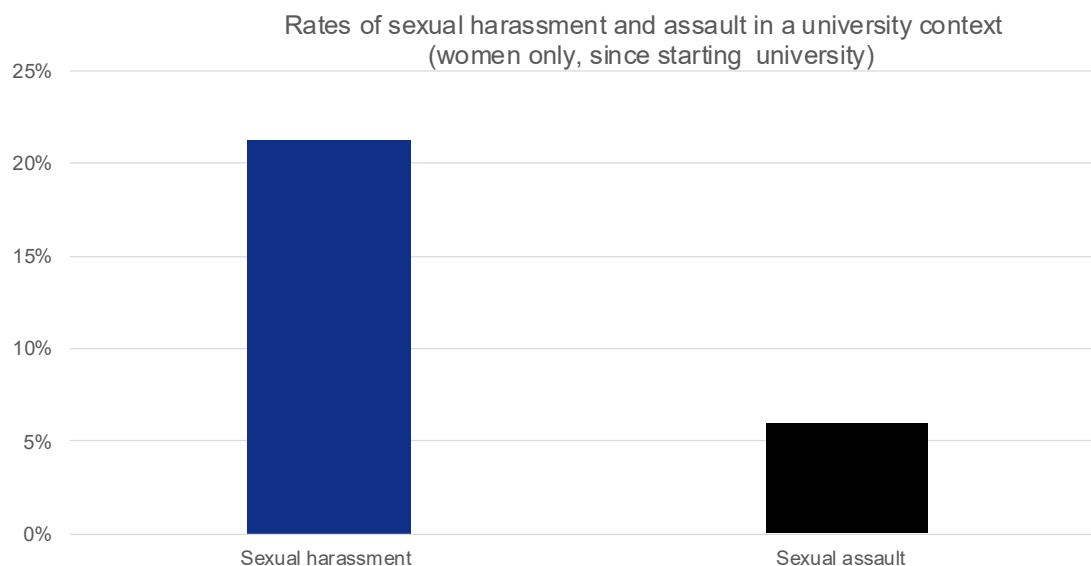
The support for students policy also signalled a loss of confidence in TEQSA and TEQSA's approach. Instead of setting out broad principles stating what is to be achieved, as the Threshold Standards do, the support for students guidelines list more than a dozen specific matters universities must include in their policies. Rather than rationing regulatory resources and focusing on institutions apparently experiencing problems with disengaged students, all higher education providers must report annually in detail to the Department of Education on their compliance with the support for students policy.

Sexual misconduct

Labor's policies on sexual harassment and assault in higher education also came with evidence of problems. A student safety survey in 2021 found that one-in-five female students had experienced sexual harassment in a university context since starting university, while one-in-twenty had experienced sexual assault (Figure 2). While rates of reporting these events to universities (Figure 3) were very low (less than 6%), nearly half of those who did report expressed dissatisfaction with the process (Figure 4) (Heywood et al., 2022).

Figure 2

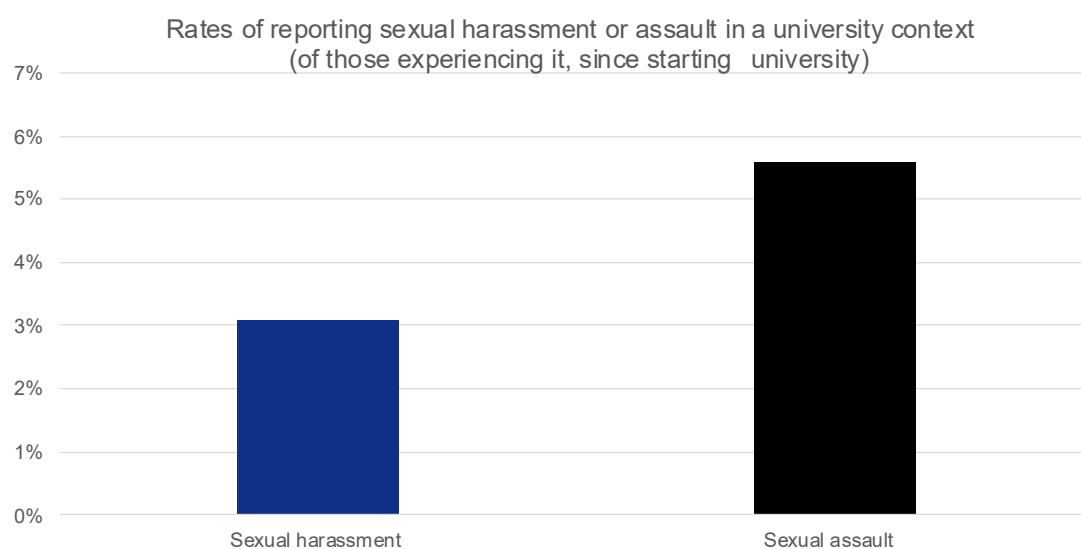
National student safety survey 2021: rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment



Sources: SRC, National student safety survey, 2021

Figure 3

National student safety survey 2021: rates of reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment

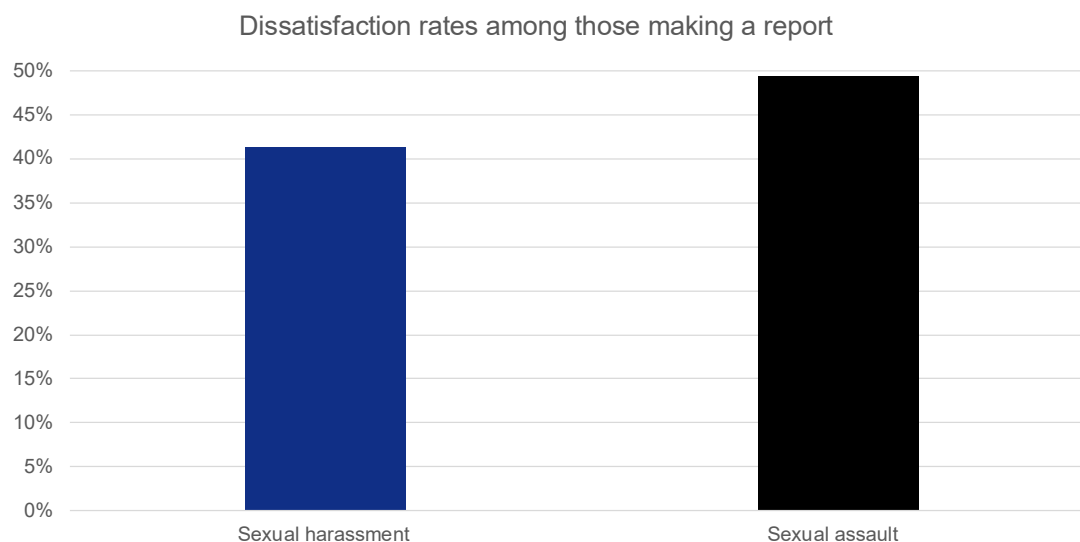


Sources: SRC, National student safety survey, 2021

Note: Gender breakdown was not reported due to low numbers.

Figure 4

National student safety survey 2021: dissatisfaction rates



Sources: SRC, National student safety survey, 2021

Note: Gender breakdown was not reported due to low numbers.

As with the support for students policy, the Threshold Standards already contain rules covering sexual misconduct, expressed as principles on safety and requirements for critical incident policies. The National Student Ombudsman (NSO), which began operations in February 2025 and is discussed in more detail below, can take student complaints about how universities handled sexual misconduct incidents. Normally, the NSO can only recommend that a university policy or practice be changed. New gender-based violence legislation, which will be in force from 1 January 2026, will give the NSO power to require that a university policy or practice be changed.

Much of the detail on how universities must handle sexual misconduct matters will be in a *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence*, to be made by the minister for education under the legislation. As of September 2025, the code had not yet been made law, but a 30-page draft is available (Department of Education, 2025). As well as specifying what higher education providers must do in the event that a student makes a complaint, the code will regulate who universities can hire, and require policies to reduce gender-based violence. Incidence reduction measures will include continuous comprehensive prevention education and training with learning outcomes defined in the code. The Secretary of the Department of Education will determine how gender equality action plans must be structured and presented and can provide mandatory feedback on each university's plan.

The code as drafted does not, however, go as far as an earlier “action plan” that would have “supported” academics to “promote gender equality, respect, diversity and inclusion in how,

and what, they teach and research” (Education Ministers, 2024, p. 11). That was moving close to a breach of academic freedom.

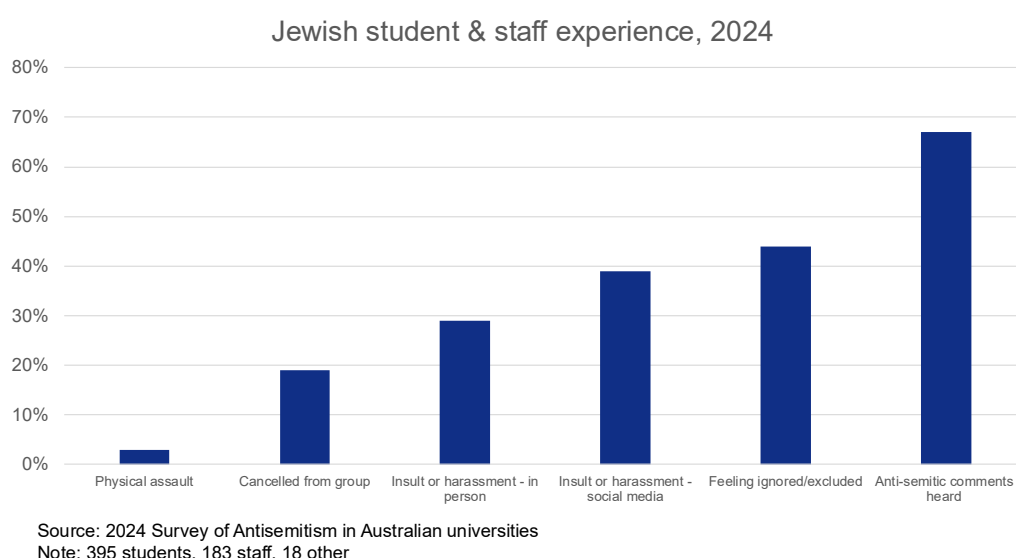
When the gender-based violence bill comes into effect three government agencies – TEQSA, the Department of Education, and the NSO – will regulate sexual misconduct in higher education. The Department of Education and the NSO will have effective power to rewrite university policies, a rare level of bureaucratic intervention in Australian universities, which have otherwise been left to work out their own implementation of government priorities.

Racism and anti-Semitism

The war in Gaza generated claim and counter-claim about racism and campus safety. Jewish students reported a significant increase in anti-Semitic incidents (Markus & Eilam, 2025, see also Figure 5). A parliamentary inquiry recommended improved complaints mechanisms for allegations of anti-Semitism, consideration of changes to employment legislation to better discipline employees engaging in anti-Semitic behaviour, consideration of strengthening TEQSA’s powers to enforce compliance with the Threshold Standards on safety, and ongoing training of students, staff and university leadership on anti-Semitism (PJCHR, 2025). A government-appointed special envoy on anti-Semitism made similar recommendations but went further, recommending withholding government funding from “universities, programs, or individuals within universities that facilitate, enable, or fail to act against antisemitism” (Segal, 2025, p. 9).

Figure 5

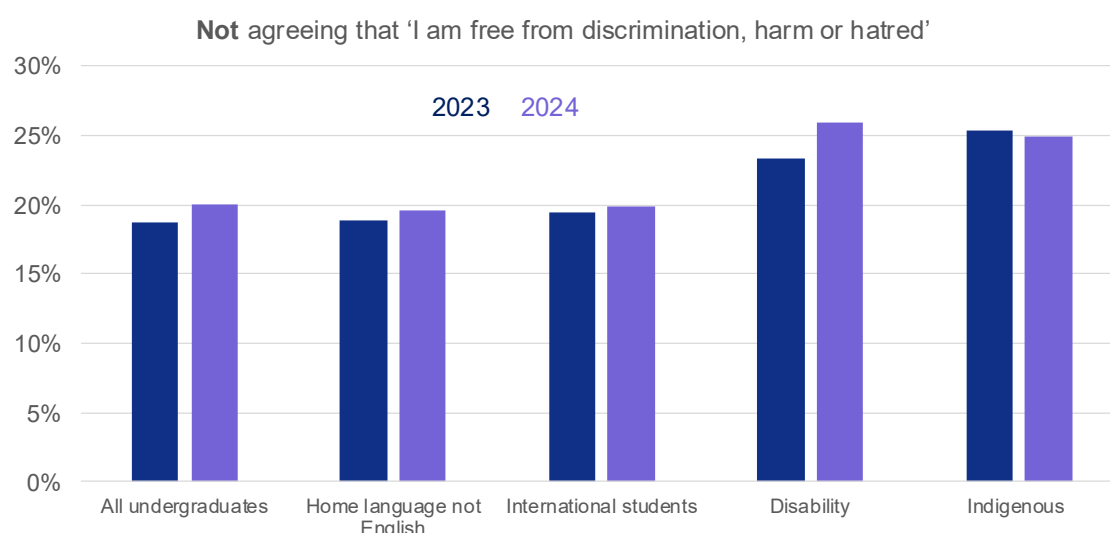
2024 survey of anti-Semitism in Australian universities



While other types of racism lacked a Gaza-like external event elevating incidence levels, they were part of university life (Omer, 2023). The limited current survey evidence suggests slightly higher incidence overall in 2024 compared to 2023 (Figure 6). In May 2024 the government commissioned a broad-ranging inquiry from the Australian Human Rights Commission (Clare & Giles, 2024). In the AHRC’s interim report, it went further than the Segal report, recommending that “anti-racism resources”, First Nations knowledge, and “knowledges, scholarship and texts authored by non-Indigenous negatively racialised people” be included in curricula from early childhood to tertiary (AHRC, 2024, p. 24). Such a requirement would be a major breach of academic freedom. The AHRC also commissioned a survey of students and staff to further investigate the prevalence of racism in higher education.

Figure 6

National student safety survey 2023-2024: discrimination, harm or hatred



Source: Social Research Centre, Student Experience Survey

Note: Negative coded responses: Neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree

TEQSA has also responded to concerns about campus safety. In March 2025, it issued a consultation paper on “external actors”, reflecting concerns that Gaza-related occupations and incidents on campus during 2024 involved people who were neither students nor staff of the university concerned. This included various measures to limit the activities of these external actors, including signs at campus entrances imposing conditions on entry, managing building access with swipe cards, requiring students and staff to carry ID cards, and considering increased use of CCTV and security guards with body cameras (TEQSA, 2025a).

Universities were unimpressed. Universities Australia pointed out that this could be viewed as “over-policing and racial profiling”—presumably a reference to targeting people who look Islamic or display Palestinian symbols (Universities Australia, 2025, p. 1). As well as noting

practical issues – such as campuses mixed in with public spaces and swipe cards preventing students moving quickly and safely between classes – QUT noted that “this advice risks imposing the look and feel of a police state on a public space that is meant to be free and open” (QUT, 2025, p. 3).

At the time of writing, the possibility of a complaint to the new National Student Ombudsman was the only new remedy for a student with a complaint about racism. But ongoing issues with anti-Semitism and the likely results of the AHRC survey may create political momentum for something like the 30-page code on gender-based violence.

National Student Ombudsman

Before 2025 students already had a range of complaint options. Existing rules on complaints apply to all higher education students through the Threshold Standards (enforced by TEQSA), at providers receiving Commonwealth support through subsidies or student loans (administered by the Department of Education), and for international students whether in higher education or not (also administered by the Department of Education). Students at public universities could complain to state and territory ombudsmen. International students at private education providers could complain to the Overseas Student Ombudsman.

Despite these existing complaint mechanisms, the government wanted more – the gender-based violence legislation discussed above and the NSO, which was legislated in 2024 and started operation in February 2025. The state and territory ombudsmen now refer university complaints they receive to the NSO – the only case in which a duplicated process was removed as part of increased regulation of higher education. In most cases, however, a dissatisfied student will need to complain to their higher education provider first. The NSO is an appeals body, not a first-stop or one-stop handler of complaints.

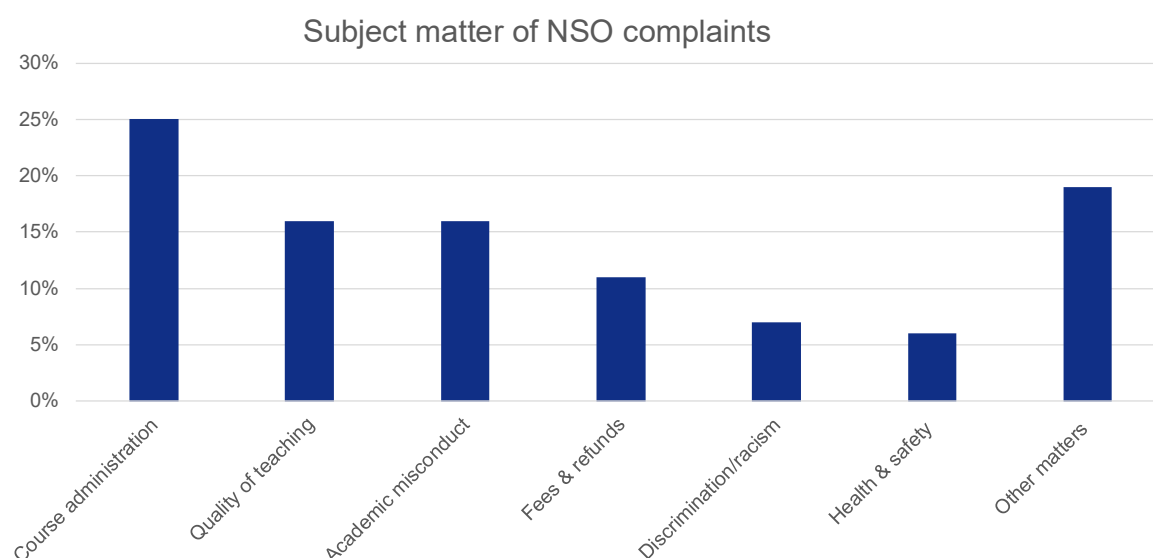
The NSO and the previous state and territory ombudsmen differ in what types of complaints can be considered. Typically state and territory ombudsmen require complaints to be made within 12 months of the issue arising. The NSO, by contrast, has no time limits on complaints. This feature is intended to bring historical sexual misconduct cases into scope, but could substantially increase the workload of both the NSO and universities.

The state and territory ombudsmen take complaints related to an administrative action, including a failure to act. The NSO by contrast, can consider any action (or inaction) of a higher education provider other than an excluded action. The excluded actions include employment matters and the exercise of academic judgment. The government, however, reads the scope of academic judgment narrowly. It claims a distinction between academic judgment and academic matters such as claims for special consideration and discipline for academic misconduct. University submissions on the NSO bill argued that such a distinction is hard to maintain (Norton, 2024c). Of the 1300 complaints received by the NSO between February and

June 2025, 16% relate to academic misconduct matters (Panagopoulos, 2025; see also Figure 7).

Figure 7

National Student Ombudsman complaints by subject



Source: *The Australian*, 18/06/25

Note: 'Health & safety' includes gender-based violence.

The NSO legislation also gives the minister for education the power to alter the excluded actions by legislative instrument. If this happened in the case of academic judgment, there is the potential for the NSO to hear complaints about university curriculum. Given curriculum pressures on gender and race issues, this is not a minor concern.

Except in the case of gender-based violence, mentioned above, the NSO has no power to force changes on universities. Its role is to make recommendations. However, its annual report will include recommendations made and higher education provider responses to them. This will work as a name-and-shame method of pressuring universities to accept its suggestions. In principle, a national student ombudsman is not a bad idea. The existing state and territory systems could not take complaints from students at private education providers; these students now have a NSO option. Public university complaints were a small proportion of the overall caseload of state and territory ombudsmen; a specialised higher education ombudsman could develop expertise possibly lacking under previous arrangements.

The risk, however, is that the NSO's broad scope takes it well beyond the largely process issues of the state and territory ombudsmen into substantive decisions about teaching and student services made by education providers. Many of these decisions involve trade-offs. Universities have finite resources. They cannot offer everything they or their students would

like to have. It is not clear that the NSO, on the evidence of a possibly small number of student complaints, would make better decisions all things considered.

Although the NSO already represents a major change in how student complaints are handled, with the gender-based violence code about to specify in greater detail how specific types of complaint are handled, in 2025 TEQSA decided to also change how it regulates student grievances and complaints. Departing from its historical practice of issuing what it calls “guidance notes” on how it interprets the Threshold Standards, it created a “statement of regulatory expectation” (SRE) (TEQSA, 2025b). The SRE is distinguished from guidance notes in being prescriptive about how providers should go about meeting the Threshold Standards requirements. It signalled annual public reporting against a framework developed by TEQSA and the NSO, leaning – as with reporting on the support for students policy and the expected gender-based violence code – away from risk-based regulation towards audit-style reporting of activity.

Student complaints will soon be regulated by the Department of Education in three different capacities (all higher education providers it funds, all higher education providers on gender, all international students), TEQSA, and the NSO.

Underpayment of casual staff

After the 1980s the share of the full-time equivalent academic workforce employed on a casual basis increased significantly, from less than 15% to 24% at its peak in the late 2010s. While industrial pressure and legal change are now reducing casual employment (Smithers et al., 2025), in 2020 casuals outnumbered academic staff on continuing or fixed-term contracts (Norton, 2023b, p. 66). The combination of many employees with variable hours employed under complex enterprise agreements created payroll management risks which, it is now clear, most universities failed to manage.

The Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) reports that, since 2020, it has been in contact with 33 universities in relation to underpayment issues (of the 44 registered universities). As of March 2025, the FWO had recovered \$176 million for 80,000 employees (Booth, 2025). A mid-2024 National Tertiary Education Union report identified 62 cases of underpayment since 2009 affecting more than 130,000 employees (NTEU, 2024b). As of September 2025, seven universities had signed an “Enforceable Undertaking” with the FWO, committing them to detailed actions to remedy underpayment problems and further audits to check on compliance.

Although the FWO is proactively enforcing industrial relations laws and agreements in the higher education sector, in May 2025 TEQSA issued its own prescriptive SRE on compliance with workplace obligations. It focuses on what governing bodies are doing to ensure this compliance. Public universities (although not other higher education providers) will, for the next two years at least, have to report annually with an “index of evidence” to support a vice-

chancellor's attestation that the university has complied with the SRE (TEQSA, 2025c). Although this reporting requirement may be temporary, it is another example of moving from a risk-based approach to an audit approach to regulation.

Overpayment of senior staff

High pay for vice-chancellors and other senior staff is a long-running source of contention in the public university sector. According to data compiled by the NTEU for 2023, and reported in Figure 8, about half of vice-chancellors earned more than \$1 million (NTEU, 2024a).

Figure 8

Vice-chancellor salaries 2023



Source: NTEU, Ending bad governance for good, Nov 2024

Note: Monash and Canberra figures replaced with more recent lower figures that do not include payouts to departing VCs.

These salaries do not breach any laws. However, they raise concerns about university governance.

University governance

The issues described above have contributed to a view that university governance is deficient. Since the 1990s, university governing bodies had been reduced in size and internal stakeholders replaced with external members, often with corporate experience (Croucher et al., 2020). A large proportion of these members lack prior professional experience in the higher education sector (Pelizzon et al., 2021).

Criticisms of university councils and senates are not always on-target. While their decisions are sometimes unpopular, they work within constraints created by policy, political, market, social and industrial environments that they can influence but cannot control.

Issues like vice-chancellor salaries, however, suggest a tin ear on how million-dollar salaries – unexceptional for senior executives in major companies – would play within universities. That these sums were paid while universities failed to fully cover even the low rates of pay of their most junior staff undoubtedly looks bad. While errors can occur in generally well-run organisations, the scale and prevalence of casual underpayment showed a systemic failure to align payroll systems with employment practices.

Changes in university governance are near-certain. A Senate inquiry into the quality of governance in Australian higher education providers is highlighting the problems (EELC, 2025). In January 2025, the government established an Expert Council on University Governance. Key areas for the Expert Council include the expertise of governing body members, employment practices and student safety (Clare, 2025a).

Australian Tertiary Education Commission

Most policies discussed in this paper were issues raised in the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Australian Government, 2024a), the product of a year-long review the government commissioned in late 2022. The Accord final report also recommended a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC).

As of September 2025, ATEC has a website but not a statute. Critical details on how it will operate remain uncertain. The government has made it clear, however, that an ATEC-driven funding system will be more managed than the current one. This will at minimum include a funding disincentive to take more domestic students than an allocated number, due to the flow-on effects on other universities (see the discussion and links at Norton, 2025a). The education minister dislikes what he calls “hunger games” practices under current policies (Clare, 2025b). While consistent with his general preference for bureaucratic over university decision-making, this policy departs from the pattern of policies – support for students, protection from sexual misconduct and racism, better complaints mechanisms, cuts to student debt not discussed here – designed to advance the interests of students. Restricting enrolments protects the interests of some universities over those of students, whose choices drive enrolment patterns.

ATEC’s functions may also involve more targeting of student places to particular courses. The *Accord Final Report* complained that the current funding system led to “unplanned, unmanaged” enrolment growth that did not meet skills needs (Australian Government, 2024a, p. 8). Such policies would take further steps away from the flexible funding system of the 2010s, which supported a multi-purpose higher education system, meeting skills needs while also funding students pursuing arts and science fields without immediate vocational relevance (Norton, 2023a).

ATEC will also take control of international student numbers, until recently an area of significant university autonomy (Clare et al., 2025). The main political reason for controlling international

student enrolments is to reduce pressure on supply-constrained accommodation. But the government also wants to protect regional universities from big-city competition. The policy document announcing international student caps foreshadowed steering international students towards courses in skill shortage in Australia (Australian Government, 2024b). While consistent with the Accord plan for domestic students, it was not aligned with other government policies. Most international students already go home, and the government has policies that make it harder for them to stay (Norton, 2024a).

Conclusion

Many higher education policies discussed in this article were ad hoc responses to issues. But the pattern of a new governing philosophy can be seen. Most clearly, the parliament, the government and the bureaucracy – the Labor Party, the Liberal Party, the Greens, the Department of Education, TEQSA, the Fair Work Ombudsman, the Australian Human Rights Commission – have lost confidence in university management. In some cases, as has been described, proven problems contributed to this loss of confidence. The consequence of lost confidence is a shift from principles-based rules to prescription, from risk-based monitoring to detailed reporting and auditing, and from market to bureaucratic allocation of student places.

Although changes were needed in some areas, the frequent piling on of rules and agencies on the same or overlapping issues creates needless confusion and cost. With each new regulation there is little or no acknowledgement of the trade-offs being made. University time and money will increasingly be diverted to compliance activities, at an unknown but inevitably growing cost to other university activities.

The problem is not just the number of interventions, but crossing lines rarely previously breached, moving into areas of academic decision-making and potentially academic freedom. The gender-based violence action plan and more blatantly the initial AHRC report on campus racism contemplate reducing academic freedom. While the NSO cannot currently review curriculum, its legislation allows this to happen in the future.

We are facing the breakdown of the small-c constitutional separation of public universities and government, with universities turning into just another arm of the state – becoming more like government schools and TAFEs and less like universities between the 1850s and 2010s. The policy challenge is to find ways to alleviate real problems without losing the benefits of academic freedom and university autonomy.

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