




Speech By
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QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AMENDMENT BILL

 **Dr MacMAHON** (South Brisbane—Grn) (3.55 pm): This bill is a Trojan Horse for corporatising our universities. It will reduce collegiality, transparency and accountability. Today it is the Queensland University of Technology; tomorrow it is the rest of our public universities. The Queensland Greens stand with university staff and students and will not be supporting this bill.

This bill makes damaging changes to the composition of QUT's council which is responsible for ensuring sound and effective governance at QUT. This bill is proof that Queensland Labor is in lock step with the federal LNP in wanting to trash our university sector. In reducing the size of the council from 22 to 15 members, staff and students have lost representation. The number of elected representatives will be reduced from nine to five, almost half. Effectively, students and staff no longer have a critical mass of numbers on the council. With council members already reporting difficulties in getting items on the agenda, things are looking pretty poor.

As someone who has worked in universities, I can tell members the landscape for university staff is incredibly bleak. As the Queensland secretary of the National Tertiary Education Union said today, 'Our members who work at QUT do not understand why the ALP would continue the work of the Newman government in reducing the number of elected staff representatives on QUT's council.' The changes in the bill are based on flawed reasoning about the appropriateness and benefits of corporate governance.

As the NTEU sets out in its submission on this bill, there is simply no evidence that small university councils contribute to institutional effectiveness—no evidence. Despite this, university management, Labor and the LNP have spent the last decade focusing on increasing external members and reducing council sizes in the name of best practice corporate governance. We have seen it in New South Wales. We have seen it in Victoria. In Victoria the Andrews Labor government reversed changes that removed elected staff and student positions on university councils. If a Labor government can stand up against corporatisation in Victoria, why can a Labor government not do the same in Queensland?

Universities are public institutions. They are not businesses. They are public institutions and they occupy a unique position in society for teaching, research, critique and learning. When we structure and resource them so students and staff can flourish, we invest in society itself. A recent study from Victoria University showed that university council size did not relate to financial, research or teaching performance in any way. Their study did show a positive correlation between council size and better monitoring and influence on teaching performance. They also found a higher number of representations from internal rather than independent members leads to better teaching and research outcomes. Here is the evidence. Larger university councils have also been entirely effective at responding to recent challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. As the NTEU pointed out, the QUT vice-chancellor had to admit to the inquiry on the bill that there had been no problems with the working of the current council.

There are well-established international principles asserting the right for higher education staff to engage in the governance of their institutions. The UNESCO recommendation states—

Higher education teaching personnel should have the right and opportunity, without discrimination of any kind, according to their abilities, to take part in the governing bodies and to criticise the functioning of higher education institutions, including their own, while respecting the rights of other sections of the academic community to participate, and they should also have the right to elect a majority of representatives to academic bodies within the higher education institutions.

Today we will go against international best principles.

In the face of all of this evidence, there is no reason for this bill, apart from the corporate politics and the drive for corporatisation of our universities to make life even harder for staff. We should be pushing for more democracy in our universities, not less.

As Academics for Public Universities stated, these regressive changes in university governance since the early 1990s have had a corrosive effect. State and federal governments have ‘handed extraordinary’ power to vice-chancellors and university senior executives who are now in power to make decisions affecting the lives of tens of thousands of staff and students with little to no accountability or transparency. This has had a ‘toxic effect on the health and wellbeing of academics, professional staff and students’.

There is no need for this bill, but there are plenty of other things this government could be doing for universities. Let us look at the actual problems in university councils, rather than this imaginary problem with size. Over time, university executives have committed serious offences and breaches of trust in Australia. The NTEU gave recent examples of Murdoch University’s vice-chancellor Richard Higgott, who resigned in 2016 over charges of corruption and pornography and recent questions around financial conflicts of interest by the Swinburne University Chancellor Graham Goldsmith through a third-party arrangement with Seek Ltd.

As the NTEU said, the role of a state government is upholding the integrity of university governance. This is all the more important in an age of university-industry collaboration, as our universities increasingly partner with business. As an example, the links between our universities and the fossil fuel sector is rife and corrosive. QUT’s chancellor was a chief executive at Rio Tinto. UQ offers the ‘Glencore Coal Assets Mining Engineering Scholarship’ and hosts the Centre for Coal Seam Gas. The appointed members of the UQ Senate is awash with people with ties to the fossil fuel industry.

In light of this, it is even more important that governing bodies ensure public money is properly spent, that research integrity is maintained and that academic freedom is ensured. Instead of this ideological modernised approach to governance, the NTEU advocates for an ethical governance approach, prioritising accountability.

The state government should be fixing the outrageous salaries of university senior executives rather than undermining institutional democracy. While staff struggle with casualisation, academics are asked to do more with no additional resources and education suffers. QUT’s Vice-Chancellor Margaret Sheil made \$1.2 million last year—go girl boss! It is unsurprising, in this context, that the university executives would request changes to the board that reduce democratic engagement.

As public employers, universities should also be the sites of good-quality jobs, helping to drive the Queensland economy. Universities are created under state acts. While the states do not fund them, the states should be setting them up as excellent places to work. Instead, the higher education sector has been chronically underfunded by successive LNP and ALP governments over decades. This year the LNP federal government has slashed university funding to the lowest level in decades. The share of total university revenue from the Australian government declined from 55.8 per cent in 2009 to 48.7 per cent in 2019. Yet, during this time, the number of students in our universities increased from 1.2 million to 1.6 million.

The federal government even denied JobKeeper to public universities, making it available only to private universities. This exclusion has led to tens of thousands of job losses across Australia since last year. This means poorer outcomes. We have seen thousands of university job cuts over this time. This also includes an unreported quantity of casual and fixed term employees who make up about two-thirds of staff. Currently, Victoria is the only state that even requires universities to report on the number of casuals they employ. How can Queensland university staff fight against the huge trend towards casualisation if we cannot even see the data?

Staff have been fired, subjects have been axed, faculties amalgamated and buildings sold, while the QUT vice-chancellor enjoys a beautiful newly renovated personal bathroom. Staff at QUT have reported a toxic culture—70 per cent of staff respondents to a recent culture survey said they did not

feel that open and honest communication existed at QUT. Meanwhile, mental illness among university staff and students is rife. The funding gap for our universities and the decline in democracy has real consequences. As Academics for Public Universities set out—

... the quality of Australia's higher education system is being systematically undermined by the wasteful ... expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars on senior executive salaries, marketing, external consultants, property development and investment speculation. Combined with attacks on academic freedom, unsustainable levels of casualisation and widespread wage theft, university senior executives show no shame when clear evidence of their maladministration ... comes to light.

Scott Morrison's government may be responsible for defunding our universities, but Queensland Labor is completely on board in seeking to weaken their governance and to weaken the capacity for students and staff to advocate for the sector. Instead of attacking university councils, the least the state government could do is to ensure their governance is robust and that staff and students have a majority say in how their unis are run.

(Time expired)