




Speech By  
**Stephen Andrew**

**MEMBER FOR MIRANI**

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**QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr ANDREW** (Mirani—PHON) (3.10 pm): I rise to speak on the Queensland University of Technology Amendment Bill 2021. According to the briefing paper and the explanatory notes, the bill's main objectives are to, firstly, reduce the size of the QUT Council from 22 members to 15 members and, secondly, to reduce the number of elected members on the council and replace them with external members who are appointed, not elected. Under the original 1998 act, the QUT Council is invested with significant power over all of the university's affairs, finances and property. That makes it an extremely powerful body with decision-making powers across everything—from where the university sources its funding to how it directs its research activities to which staff it hires and what policies it adopts. The council should therefore be run in a way that maintains public trust, preserves the independence of its research work, advances the cause of academic freedom and avoids conflicts of interest. To achieve this, the composition of the council should be diverse, independent, accountable and transparent.

This bill does nothing in terms of achieving any of these goals. Instead, its provisions will only serve to diminish them, particularly the important principles of independence, accountability and transparency. It represents yet another redistribution of power away from accountable representation towards unaccountable appointments from government and industry. According to QUT management, the additional external membership will give the university the 'opportunity to bring in the kind of expertise that we may not have achieved through the elected representatives'.

On this theme, specific reference is made in the bill's associated documentation to the need for members with commercial or industry experience, particularly in the area of research and development. In other words, the new external members that the bill provides for are to be drawn from vested interests within the private sector, including large transnational corporations and wealthy foundations. Similar legislation has already passed in relation to Griffith and James Cook universities which has greatly reduced the ability of elected staff and students to have a say on any of the issues affecting their own institution or critical decisions involving finance, research, ethics, teaching and staffing. The NTEU, which submitted a dissenting submission, emphasised the vital importance of—

... well-established international principles that assert higher education staff have a right and a professional responsibility to engage in the governance of their institutions.

UNESCO's recommendation concerning the status of higher education teaching also 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 right 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.

The bill is a clear breach of those principles. Everything about this bill reflects the prevailing belief of today's leaders that every single governing body in the country must be brought under the direct control of a tiny group of elite technocrats and so-called public-private partnerships. As far as I am concerned, such partnerships are not only deeply undemocratic and secretive; they represent a very real danger for widespread and systemic corruption and collusion in this country. That is why I find the

bill's reduction of the council's elected representation extremely concerning. It follows the same relentless drive we are seeing across the political spectrum to eliminate all forms of democratic or accountable representation from positions of power or influence in Australia. If left unchecked, it will end with all power and all authority being exercised by a tiny group of interconnected elites operating completely outside any established principle of participatory or representative democracy.

Appointed external members are accountable to no-one but themselves, their own group interests and those of their government or corporate sponsors. It is a system with no place for the individual citizen or elected representative and contains no mechanism through which leadership can be made responsive to the rights and needs of those they govern. I am amazed that no-one in politics today seems to appreciate just how dangerous this form of governance is to our democratic values and traditions. I may not have much expertise or inside knowledge on the workings of universities, but I know a power grab when I see one, and I definitely see one in this bill.

My other major concern with this bill specifically relates to its unintended consequences and the potential for conflicts of interest to operate in any future decision-making, policies and research activities at QUT. Page 3 of the NTEU's submission states—

Official members of university councils in other state jurisdictions have on occasion committed (or have been alleged to commit) serious offences and breaches of trust against their institutions ...

NTEU cites two such cases, one involving the Murdoch University vice-chancellor who resigned in 2016 amidst corruption charges and the recent allegations against another chancellor arising from certain third-party arrangements he enjoyed with the internet giant Seek Ltd. Conflicts of interest are the big elephant in the room when it comes to our universities today, particularly in the realm of medical research and the highly politicised area of climate change. I know that in the reef regions public trust in the independence of some of the research universities are putting out has been pretty much smashed over the last 10 years. People are not stupid and know what massive conflicts of interest are created when wealthy environmental foundations and others pour billions into a field of research with an outcome that would seem to be predetermined.

Trust is indispensable, especially in the area of clinical research and climate data, and right now that trust is probably lower than it has ever been in this country. It is high time that governments paid attention to the problem, because it is a serious one. Currently, all the legal and ethical frameworks around conflicts of interest are directed towards the individual. I could find almost nothing on the issue at the institutional or government department level. The media also maintain their focus at the level of the individual, with politicians being the easy target for news and stories done on the subject.

**Ms KING:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I question whether the current content is of relevance to the long title of the bill.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mrs Gerber): Member for Mirani, I have been listening and there is some latitude in the long title of the bill. I will let you continue to see if you can come back to the long title of the bill when you are making your point.

**Mr ANDREW:** Okay. The fact is that university councils make decisions and judgements all of the time that impact government decision-making and policy. They also play a major role in forming public opinion across a wide variety of issues. We need to recognise that they are just as financially invested or compromised by profitable partnerships as any politician or minister in government. Since Howard's corporatisation reforms in 2005, universities are now multibillion-dollar corporations. All enjoy highly profitable and cosy relationships within governments and many international entities, and donors fund much of their work. When any of our public leaders talk about universities, it is hardly ever about their vital role as educators. That has all gone. Now it is all about their role as innovators or entrepreneurs and taking their ideas from the lab to the market.

The Australian health minister gave a speech earlier this year in which he spoke about the role universities will play in the new normal world being rolled out between now and 2030. Instead of encouraging universities to improve their standards and access, the minister spoke only of commercialisation and the need for universities to become even more closely involved in government policy making. Not only is university research becoming more commercialised; now it is further co-opted into the political process and can be openly used sometimes as a political weapon.

The current bill represents another troubling step along this road. As the National Tertiary Education Union pointed out, many reports over the years have raised the issue of conflicts of interest and the potential for universities to become controlled entities of government policy. This challenges my view on the whole subject of this bill and I find there are some inadequacies.