

# Elective spending at Australian universities

Millions splashed on consultancies, travel and advertising

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*Many of Australia's public universities have announced plans to make significant budget cuts. Using the examples of the Australian Catholic University, the Australian National University and the University of Wollongong, this paper shows that high spending on consultants, advertising, and travel could have instead covered much of these proposed cuts. The budgetary decisions raise fundamental questions about what our universities are for. If they spent less money on inessential things, they would have more to pay staff properly and avoid budget crises.*

Discussion paper

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# Summary

Several Australian universities have recently announced cost-cutting measures to repair budget deficits of their own creation. But these same universities have assets worth hundreds of millions of dollars, and spend liberally on things like advertising, consultants, and executive travel, the educational value of which are highly questionable.

In 2023, Australia's public universities spent \$363 million on advertising and marketing. In the case of Flinders University, advertising costs last year extended to the sponsorship of a Big Bash cricket team. Griffith University spent \$18.4 million on advertising in 2022, but recorded a net increase of just 651 new commencements the following year. This is roughly \$23,000 spent on advertising per additional new commencement. The Australian Catholic University fared even worse – in 2021 it spent \$6 million on advertising only to see new commencements fall by 76 students the following year.

Ten universities together spent more than \$390 million on travel in 2023. Senior executives, the highest-paid people on Australian university campuses, spent a disproportionate share of that money. For example, at the University of Queensland in 2023, the Vice-Chancellor spent the same as 15 ordinary lecturers on overseas travel. Of the Australian National University's \$42 million travel spending, roughly a quarter (\$11 million) was spent by executives. That \$11 million was the equivalent of 95 entry-level lecturers' annual salary.

In 2023, 27 Australian public universities spent roughly \$410 million on consultants. This included The University of New England, which spent \$5.7 million on consultants, half of which went to three of the "big four" firms. The University of Melbourne, meanwhile, spent up to 64% of its large consultancy budget on three of the big firms.

Universities spend big on these elective items, but staff and students are asked to bear the brunt of budget cuts when the reports show large deficits. This report looks at three recent examples, including:

- The Australian National University, which in 2022 and 2023 spent \$190 million on consultants, advertising and travel. In 2023, its spending on consultants was equivalent to a quarter of what all public universities in Victoria and Queensland spent combined. In 2024 it announced a plan to cut staff costs by \$100 million, and other costs by \$150 million. Only after staff costs had been cut by \$13 million did the university admit it had overstated its deficit by about \$60 million.
- The Australian Catholic University, which between 2021 and 2023 spent \$26 million on advertising and a further \$33 million on consultants. In 2023 it pursued \$30 million worth of cuts to academic and professional jobs to repair a budget deficit of \$27.7 million.

- The University of Wollongong, which in 2023 spent \$22 million on consultants and travel. That amounts to 40% of the \$51 million that UOW hopes to save through two rounds of cuts, including to jobs.

The annual reports of Australia's public universities clearly show how wealthy these institutions are. In 2023, the ANU had \$3.65 billion in net assets, while the ACU had almost \$765 million, and the UOW had roughly \$810 million.

Great countries should have great institutions. Australia's universities have previously ranked among the world's best but have recently fallen in international rankings thanks partly to the sweeping cuts to their staff budgets and the deteriorating quality of their offerings. Universities need to be more transparent about their discretionary spending, so that staff and students can see exactly where the money spent in their name is going. An institution that protects its paper assets over its real assets – its staff and students – is an institution in need of repair.

The following policies could be introduced to increase transparency and accountability at Australia's universities:

- Improved disclosure requirements for consultancy spending across all states. Queensland and Victoria currently require their universities to disclose all consultancy spending in a separate statement, and in Victoria's case at an individual firm level for all contracts above \$10,000. Itemised disclosure requirements would improve transparency in university finances and improve the trust of their communities.
- Nationally consistent disclosure rules for overseas travel expenses, which would ensure a leaner and fairer travel funding environment in Australian universities.
- Institutional caps on executive travel costs to reduce the burden of business class flights on university budgets.
- Ensure the new Australian Tertiary Education Commission plays a leading role in managing student loads and demand fluctuations so that the sector does not need to spend \$363 million on advertising to compete for new enrolments.
- Nationally consistent annual reporting categories for universities so that better aggregate figures can be derived for the whole sector.

# Introduction

In 2023, Australian public universities spent nearly \$363 million on advertising. Ten universities together spent more than \$390 million on travel, while 27 universities with similar annual reporting categories spent \$410 million on consultants. Many of these same universities are now expecting staff and students to bear the brunt of budget cuts.

In the past two years, several Australian universities have undertaken or announced plans for major budget cuts, including cuts to the academic staff who conduct the research and teach the courses that are at the heart of what higher education is for. The reality, however, is that universities have money, and plenty of it, but much of it is spent on things that are not the research or teaching that should be at the heart of Australia's public higher education system.

As we have shown elsewhere, Vice-Chancellors are now paid seven times as much as lecturers and teachers.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we examine other areas of significant non-academic university spending – namely consultants, advertising, and executive travel – that have contributed to the fiscal crises that Australia's universities are now in.

The Australian Catholic University (ACU), the Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Wollongong (UOW) are three good examples of where high spending on advertising, consultants, and travel has been followed quickly by budget cuts, the brunt of which are borne by staff and students.

These three examples are useful not because they are extraordinary, but because they are typical. None of the three are the sector's biggest spenders on advertising (that distinction goes to UNSW, which in 2023 spent more than \$23.5 million) or travel (University of Melbourne, which spent almost \$68 million in the same year). While the ANU's \$54 million spending on consultancies is unusually high, it is still dwarfed by UNSW, which spent \$316 million on "contract services (including consultants)" in 2023.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, these universities have announced big cuts to their budgets.

In 2023, ACU abolished at least 80 full-time professional jobs and roughly 30 academic jobs in the humanities disciplines. This included the disestablishment of its world-leading

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<sup>1</sup> Thrower (2025) *Uni Vice-Chancellors keep getting richer while those who teach and research are left behind*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/uni-vice-chancellors-keep-getting-richer-while-those-who-teach-and-research-are-left-behind/>

<sup>2</sup> UNSW (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 132, <https://www.unsw.edu.au/newsroom/annual-reports>

Dioana Institute of Philosophy and the Medieval and Early Modern Research program.<sup>3</sup> The ANU, meanwhile, has initiated a plan to save \$250 million by 1 January 2026, with at least \$100 million coming from salary cuts. UOW has announced two rounds of cuts worth \$51 million in total. Four disciplines – Cultural Studies, Japanese, Mandarin and Science & Technology Studies (STS) – are to be abolished entirely.<sup>4</sup>

Even as they cut staff and reduce their offerings, these universities remain big spenders on discretionary items like travel, consultants and advertising. This boils down to a fundamental question of priorities. What is more important at a university: teachers or consultants? Low staff to student ratios or bus-side advertising? Field research or executive travel?

In just two years (2022 and 2023) the ANU spent \$190 million on travel, advertising and consultants. Its spending on consultants alone was equivalent to a quarter of what all public universities in Victoria and Queensland spent combined.<sup>5</sup> Its total spending on these three discretionary items could have covered the \$100 million of salary cuts and 60% of the \$150 million non-salary cuts now earmarked by its leadership.

If UOW had cut its travel and consulting costs in half for any three years between 2013 and 2023, it would have eliminated the shortfall that has been used to justify the disestablishment of culturally valuable disciplines and dozens of jobs.

These universities also have money behind them. In fact, they have “billions of dollars’ worth of cash, bonds, shares and other financial assets.”<sup>6</sup> For example:

- The ANU’s 2023 annual report shows that its net assets were valued at \$3.65 billion, its financial assets alone amounting to \$1.85 billion.<sup>7</sup>
- The ACU had its net assets valued at nearly \$765 million in 2023.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cassidy (2023) ‘Australian Catholic University sparks anger over scrapping medieval history and philosophy departments’, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/14/australian-catholic-university-condemned-over-totally-indefensible-cuts-to-humanities-programs>

<sup>4</sup> Long (2025) *Staffing and teaching changes achieve \$21m in recurrent savings*, [https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/final-teaching-workplace-change-plan-announced.php#:~:text=4%20disciplines%20remain%20unviable%20\(Cultural,Studies\)%20and%20will%20be%20disestablished.](https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/final-teaching-workplace-change-plan-announced.php#:~:text=4%20disciplines%20remain%20unviable%20(Cultural,Studies)%20and%20will%20be%20disestablished.)

<sup>5</sup> Adhikari (2024) *Australian public universities are now spending millions on consultants*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/australian-public-universities-are-now-spending-millions-on-consultants/>

<sup>6</sup> Littleton (2022) *At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia’s public universities?* <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/at-the-crossroads/>; Denniss (2020) ‘Unis must save staff not cash reserves’, *The Saturday Paper*, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/opinion/topic/2020/06/06/unis-must-save-staff-not-cash-reserves/15913656009925>

<sup>7</sup> ANU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 14, <https://www.anu.edu.au/about/strategic-planning/annual-report-2023>

<sup>8</sup> ACU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 31, <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/leadership-and-governance/governance/corporation/annual-reports>



- UOW's net assets were valued at more than \$810 million for 2023, a decrease of 11% on the previous year's asset valuation on account of capital expenditure, debt repayments and the "impairment of UOW [Hong Kong] property".<sup>9</sup>

Even if we ignore the vast reserves of cash, investments, financial instruments and property underwriting university balance sheets and focus purely on the spending habits of the "parent entities" (the universities minus their subsidiary entities), there is money to be saved in their discretionary spending. This report shows that in the case of ACU, ANU and UOW, livelihoods would be saved if there were greater scrutiny and transparency around these items.

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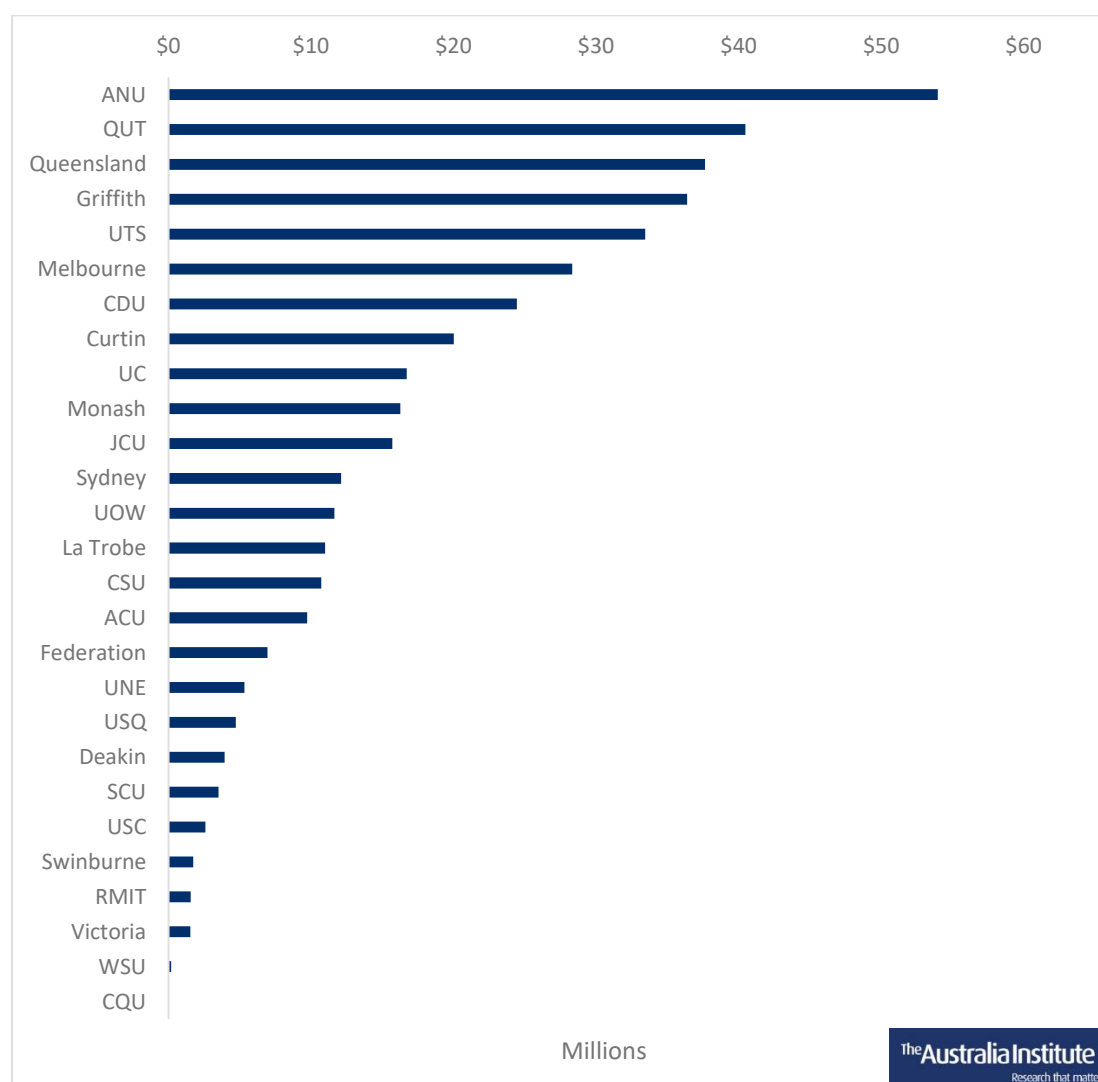
<sup>9</sup> UOW (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 26, <https://www.uow.edu.au/about/annual-reports-and-financial-statements/>

# Consultants

Universities spend tens of millions of dollars each year on consultants. Variations in the categories used in annual reports make it difficult to derive a sector-wide spending figure, but there are some proxy sums that can illustrate the magnitude of universities' spending on consultants and professional fees. Five of Australia's metropolitan Group of Eight universities spent more than \$150 million on consultants between them.

In 2023, the 27 universities with the most directly comparable annual reports spent nearly \$410 million on consultants. That amounted to an average expenditure of over \$15 million each.

**Figure 1: University expenditure on "consultants" in 2023.**



Source: annual reports.

These are the universities whose financial statements are categorised most similarly, but even here, there are some arbitrary, even evasive distinctions. The University of Sydney spent \$12.1 million on consultants in 2023, but it also spent \$153.2 million on “externally sourced services”, details of which are not specified.<sup>10</sup> Central Queensland University reports its consultancy spending separately, but its annual report also includes an aggregate figure for “management and consultant fees”, which in 2023 was close to \$2 million.<sup>11</sup>

Four other universities (University of Tasmania, Edith Cowan University, University of Newcastle and the University of Western Australia) spent \$159.9 million on “professional services”. Of these four, the University of Newcastle was a distinct outlier with \$76.2 million spent on “professional services” in 2023. The average spending among these four institutions was almost \$40 million, though this falls to \$28 million if Newcastle is excluded.

Another two (UNSW and Macquarie University) prefer to group “consultants” and “contractors” together in their annual reports. In 2023, UNSW spent \$316 million in this category, while Macquarie spent \$58 million. A further three universities list this type of spending in sundry ways. The University of Notre Dame spent \$5.8 million on “Consultancy, audit fees, bank charges, legal costs and insurance expenses.” The University of Adelaide spent \$35.5 million on “consultants and specialist services”, while the University of South Australia spent \$83 million on “external services.”

Few would argue with the need for universities to procure external legal advice or IT services, and university executives would likely protest that these make up a large portion of the generic “consultancy” figures in their annual reports. But such complaints illustrate the argument for more transparency, not less. One commentator familiar with the sector’s practices suggests that most of these services are of the “strategic management variety”.<sup>12</sup>

Roughly a third (30%) of La Trobe University’s consultancy spending was for “strategy development” or “management consulting” (almost \$3.2 million).<sup>13</sup> These include contracts with Nous Consulting Group and KPMG that were worth a combined total of roughly \$718,000. At UNE, almost half (49%) of consultancy expenditure went to PwC, EY and KPMG for “analysis and project support” and “internal audit services”.<sup>14</sup> At James Cook University,

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<sup>10</sup> University of Sydney (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 78, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/annual-report.html>

<sup>11</sup> CQU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 66, <https://www.cqu.edu.au/about-us/annual-report>

<sup>12</sup> Moore (2023) *The Big Four consultants have captured universities*, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/education/2023/06/17/the-big-four-consultants-have-captured-universities#mtr>

<sup>13</sup> La Trobe University (2024) *Consultants 2023*, <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/council/resources>

<sup>14</sup> UNE (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 42, <https://www.une.edu.au/about-une/annual-reports>

nearly a quarter (23%) of the \$15.7 million spent on consultants was for “human resources management”, “communications” or “finance/accounting”.<sup>15</sup>

Even as universities have spent big on consultants, they have practised systemic wage theft. In a recent NSW budget estimates hearing the University of Sydney revealed that it had spent \$12.3 million on professional contractors and consultants to manage its own wage theft review and remediation program from 2020 to 2024.<sup>16</sup>

If universities better utilised the knowledge and expertise they already have, they would save millions in annual expenditure. Writing in *The Saturday Paper*, one former academic has rightly noted that universities are knowledge-making institutions and should not need external advice for strategic decision-making.<sup>17</sup> University leaders could save money and improve institutional morale if staff had greater say in decision-making.

Previous Australia Institute research has shown that public universities in Victoria and Queensland spent \$209 million on consultants in 2023.<sup>18</sup> Disclosure laws in these states require public universities to publish their consultancy spending, and in the case of Victoria, individually for contracts above \$10,000. This means that we can see the project categories and costs of specific consulting contracts. For example, the University of Melbourne, spent 64% of its consultancy budget on services from three of the ‘Big Four’ consultants: KPMG (for “IT consultancy services”), Deloitte and PwC (both for “business advisory services”).<sup>19</sup>

Other states have no such transparency requirements, which means that universities can report their consulting expenditure as an annual sum without disaggregating by item, project type or contract worth. Students, staff and community stakeholders learn very little about where their institution’s funds have gone.

An itemised disclosure requirement for consultancy spending, if implemented across the country, would significantly improve transparency in university finances and help to rebuild the trust of their communities.

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<sup>15</sup> JCU (2024) *2023 Open data – consultancies*, <https://www.jcu.edu.au/about-jcu/strategic-direction/annual-report>

<sup>16</sup> University of Sydney (2 October 2024), Responses to Supplementary Questions, Budget Estimates, *NSW Legislative Council*, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/Pages/budget-estimates.aspx>

<sup>17</sup> Moore (2023) *The Big Four consultants have captured universities*, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/education/2023/06/17/the-big-four-consultants-have-captured-universities#mtr>

<sup>18</sup> Adhikari (2024) *Australian public universities are now spending millions on consultants*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/australian-public-universities-are-now-spending-millions-on-consultants/>

<sup>19</sup> University of Melbourne (2024) *2023 UOM consultancy disclosure*, <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/news-resources/reports-and-publications>

# Executive Travel

In 2023, ten Australian universities managed to spend a combined total of \$390 million on travel (Figure 3). We know that, in some cases, the executive proportion of total travel spending amounts to a quarter of total travel costs (as discussed below). If that were true of the sector more broadly, then those ten universities would have spent a combined total of \$97.5 million on executive travel in 2023.

The University of Melbourne was Australia's biggest spender on travel in 2023. It spent \$67.9 million on travel, or roughly \$14 million more than the runner-up, the University of Sydney, which spent \$55 million.

These individual figures can look small on a university's annual financial statement, but they can in fact make the difference between operating surplus or deficit.

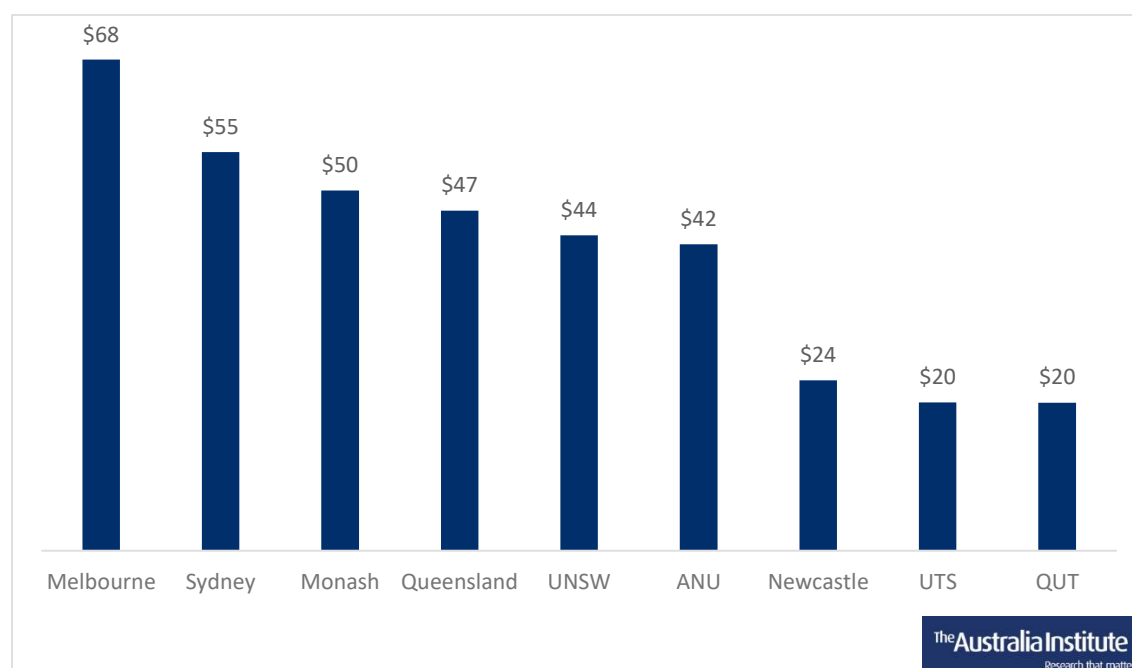
At a recent Tasmanian parliamentary hearing, the University of Tasmania explained its 2023 deficit (\$10.4 million including its subsidiaries) by blaming "inflation" and the "challenging international student market".<sup>20</sup> While both may be true, its deficit was dwarfed by its travel spending, which exceeded \$18.6 million (subsidiaries included).<sup>21</sup> Tellingly, that travel figure did not even rank it among the top 10 spenders in 2023.

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<sup>20</sup> UTAS (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 70, <https://www.utas.edu.au/about/governance-leadership-and-strategy/governance/annual-reports>

<sup>21</sup> UTAS (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 95, <https://www.utas.edu.au/about/governance-leadership-and-strategy/governance/annual-reports>

**Figure 2: Top ten universities by travel spending, 2023. (Selected universities by travel spending.)**



Source: annual reports.

University annual reports generally do not give detailed data on how travel budgets are spent, but Queensland's unique disclosure requirements suggest that executives make the greatest claims on university accounts.

The University of Queensland's Vice-Chancellor spent just over \$101,000 on overseas travel in 2023. In the same year, overseas travel spending for 89 staff listed as Lecturer (Level B) amounted to \$594,550.<sup>22</sup> This means that overseas travel for one Vice-Chancellor was equivalent to that of about 15 ordinary lecturers.

At James Cook University in 2023, nearly 10% of the overseas travel budget was spent by six executives (including the Vice-Chancellor).<sup>23</sup> At Griffith University in the same year, a single executive whose role is entitled Vice-President (Global) spent the equivalent of a Level C lecturer's salary (which in 2023 was \$144,571) on overseas travel.<sup>24</sup> Griffith University does

<sup>22</sup> University of Queensland (2024) *Overseas travel*, <https://about-us.uq.edu.au/organisation/policies-procedures-guidelines/annual-reports>

<sup>23</sup> JCU (n.d.) *2023 Open Data – Overseas Travel*, <https://www.jcu.edu.au/about-jcu/strategic-direction/annual-report>

<sup>24</sup> Griffith University (2024) *2023 overseas travel report*, [https://www.griffith.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/file/0036/1946763/Griffith-University-Overseas-Travel-Report-2023.csv](https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0036/1946763/Griffith-University-Overseas-Travel-Report-2023.csv); Griffith University (2023) *Academic Staff Enterprise Agreement 2023-2025*, p 52, Schedule 3, Level C Step 5 (March 2023), <https://www.griffith.edu.au/staff/human-resources/enterprise-agreements>.

not have an overseas campus, and in its 2023 annual report recorded on 11 students whose home campus was “offshore”.<sup>25</sup>

Most universities choose not to disclose this kind of information about their travel costs at all. If executives continue to spend big on their own travel without any public accountability, total travel costs will continue to undermine wider efforts to balance universities’ operational deficits. Nationally consistent disclosure rules and greater scrutiny of travel costs would ensure a leaner and fairer travel funding environment in Australian universities.

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<sup>25</sup> Griffith University (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 19, <https://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/corporate-governance/plans-publications#reports>

# Advertising and Marketing

Each year, Australian universities spend millions on advertising, marketing and promotional expenses that could help pay for teaching and learning costs. University marketing can take the form of television and online advertisements, posters and wraparounds on buses and bus stops, sporting sponsorships, printed material and more. In August 2024 Nielsen reported that universities spent more than \$175 million solely on advertisements in the previous twelve months.<sup>26</sup> As public higher education institutions, Australia's universities should not need to compete with each other for customers. These high advertising budgets are a symptom of a larger underlying issue with the sector.

Australia's public universities spent roughly \$363 million on advertising, marketing and promotional expenses in 2023. These are all public institutions, founded by Acts of the relevant state governments. While some campaigns are designed to enhance the generic brand of a university or to raise an institution's profile in the hope of attracting philanthropic funding, most of these campaigns are aimed at prospective new enrolments.

In addition to expensive advertising campaigns, universities invest in promotional partnerships with sporting teams. Money is spent so that the institution can have its name and logo displayed around stadiums during broadcasts, as Edith Cowan University did during the 2015 AFL Grand Final.<sup>27</sup>

In December 2024, Flinders University announced itself as the new "Principal Partner" of the Adelaide Strikers Big Bash League team. Flinders claimed that this would benefit students enrolled in the Diploma of Sport Management (Cricket), providing them with links, access and "hands-on experience".<sup>28</sup> The immediate outcome, though, was that Flinders got its logo on the centre of players' uniforms and on the pitch itself.<sup>29</sup> This is only one example of a university sponsoring a sports team.

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<sup>26</sup> Nielsen (2024) *Nielsen data shows Australian tertiary education institutions spent more than \$175m on ads in last 12 months*, <https://www.nielsen.com/news-center/2024/nielsen-data-shows-australian-tertiary-education-institutions-spent-more-than-175m-on-ads-in-last-12-months/>

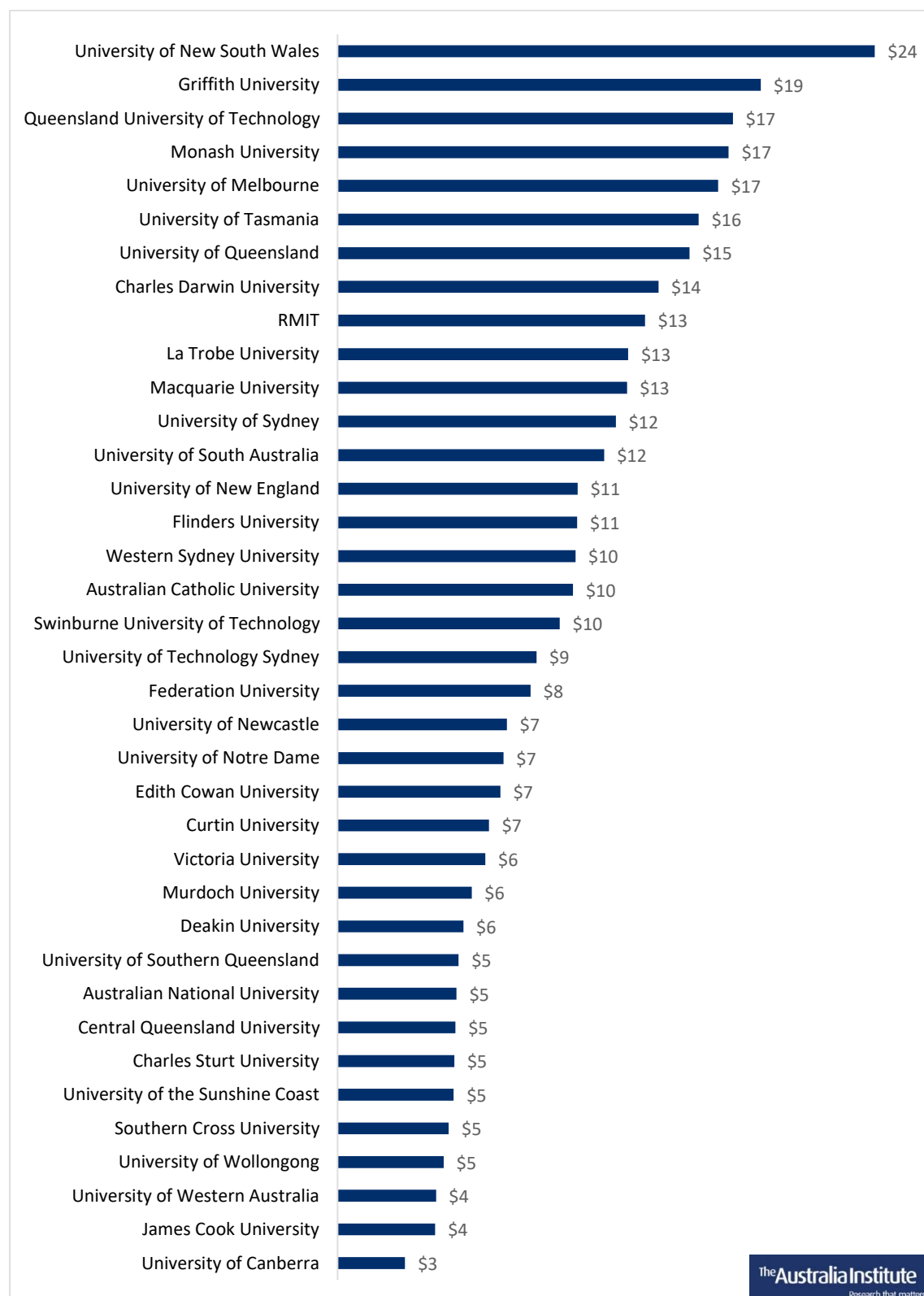
<sup>27</sup> Cervini (2015) 'Universities spend millions on marketing but word of mouth from students seems as effective', *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/education/universities-spend-millions-on-marketing-but-word-of-mouth-from-students-seems-as-effective-20151022-gkfy.html>; Big Bash (2025), 'Adelaide Strikers v Brisbane Heat Match Highlights', *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jig2BIA91Sw>

<sup>28</sup> Flinders University (2024) *Flinders and Adelaide Strikers bowling over education barriers*, <https://news.flinders.edu.au/blog/2024/12/12/flinders-and-adelaide-strikers-bowling-over-education-barriers/>

<sup>29</sup> Big Bash (2025), 'Adelaide Strikers v Brisbane Heat Match Highlights', *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jig2BIA91Sw>



**Figure 3: Australian public universities ranked according to expenditure on advertising, marketing and promotional expenses (\$ millions) in 2023.**



Source: annual reports.

Little of this spending leads to higher student commencement rates.

In 2022, UNSW spent just over \$17 million on advertising and increased its new commencements by 14% (3,550 students) the following year. Monash University spent almost \$22 million on advertising and marketing in 2022 for about the same increase (14.7%, or 3,845 students) in 2023. Assuming that the goal of advertising is to attract additional students, Monash arguably spent an extra \$5 million for no appreciable gain. That \$5 million could have covered the salary costs of up to 30 Level D academics (Associate Professors) for the calendar year.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively it could have paid for the cost of the former Vice-Chancellor's farewell party (\$127,000) nearly 40 times over.<sup>31</sup>

Also in 2022, Griffith University spent more than \$18.4 million on advertising and marketing only to boost its new commencements by 3.9% (651) in the following year. That amounts to \$23,000 worth of advertising for every new commencement above the previous year's figure.

The University of Tasmania spent \$16.5 million on advertising and marketing in 2023 and its new commencements rose by 3.8% the following year. This was an increase of just 568 additional new commencements from 2022. If new commencements in 2023 had remained level with those of 2022 in the absence of advertising, then it arguably cost UTAS \$29,100 per head to attract each of those 568 students.

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<sup>30</sup> Monash University (2024) *Monash University Enterprise Agreement (Academic and Professional Staff) 2024*, Schedule 2, Level D Step 4 (3 Dec 22), <https://www.monash.edu/current-enterprise-agreements/academic-professional-2024#S1>

<sup>31</sup> AAP and Guardian Staff (2024) 'Monash University criticised over \$127,000 farewell party for vice-chancellor while students "sit on the floor"', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/mar/05/monash-university-farewell-party-vice-chancellor-margaret-gardner-ngv-cost>

# Case Studies

ACU, ANU and UOW are compelling examples of the trade-offs that universities have made between investing in education, and spending on consultants, travel, and advertising. In the past two years, each university has embarked on a major program of cuts to courses and jobs for the sake of a future budget surplus.

## AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

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From 2021 to 2023, ACU spent over \$26 million on advertising and marketing. In the same period, it spent \$33 million on consultants' fees. While these were not the largest expenses the university incurred in that period – a new building in Fitzroy, Melbourne cost \$250 million<sup>32</sup> – they contributed to ACU's operational shortfall.

### Deficit and Cuts

In 2023 ACU reported an operational net deficit of \$27.7 million for 2023.<sup>33</sup> Its total revenue and operational income for 2023 stood at \$571.6 million and its total expenses from continuing operations at roughly \$599.3 million.<sup>34</sup> But despite the opportunity to save money on discretionary spending, the university embarked on two rounds of change management plans involving cuts to staff.

First, in early 2023, ACU leaders announced plans to cut 110 full-time professional (non-research or teaching) staff for a net saving of \$16 million, alongside other measures that would amount to a total of \$30 million in cuts.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, just 80 of those positions appear to have been abolished in that wave.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Carey (2023) 'Australian Catholic Uni cuts 100 jobs, 40 in Melbourne, as enrolments shrink, costs rise', *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/australian-catholic-uni-cuts-110-jobs-mostly-in-melbourne-as-enrolments-shrink-costs-rise-20230215-p5cko6.html>

<sup>33</sup> ACU (2023) *Annual report 2022*, p 26, <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/leadership-and-governance/governance/corporation/annual-reports>; ACU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 26, <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/leadership-and-governance/governance/corporation/annual-reports>

<sup>34</sup> ACU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 26, <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/leadership-and-governance/governance/corporation/annual-reports>

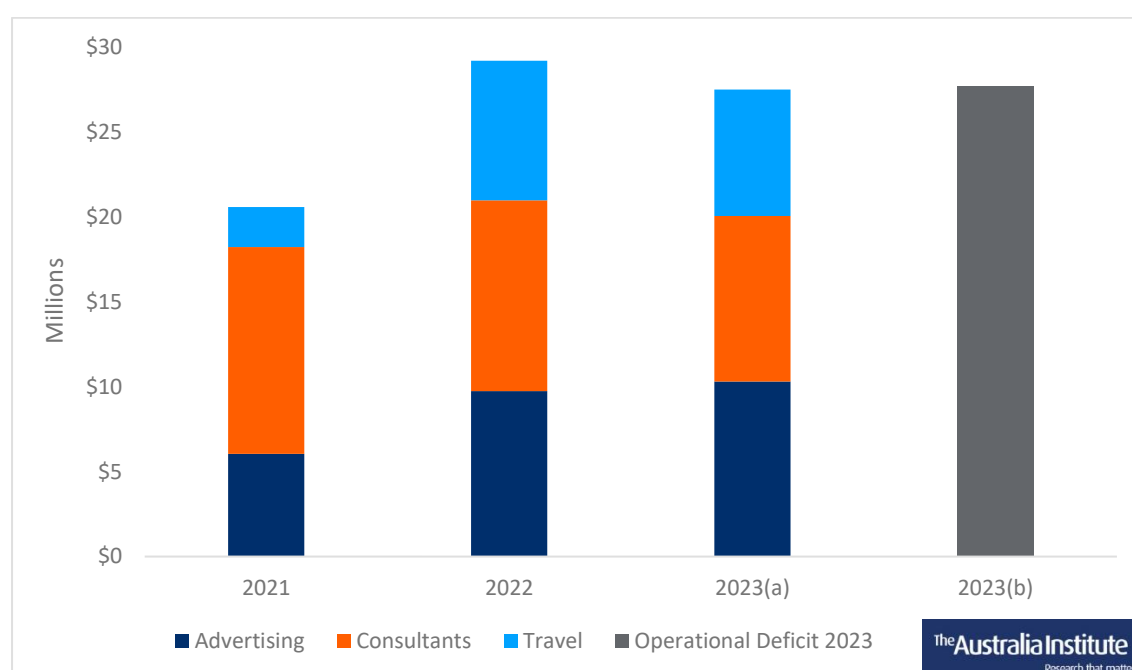
<sup>35</sup> Carey (2023) 'Australian Catholic Uni cuts 100 jobs, 40 in Melbourne, as enrolments shrink, costs rise', *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/australian-catholic-uni-cuts-110-jobs-mostly-in-melbourne-as-enrolments-shrink-costs-rise-20230215-p5cko6.html>

<sup>36</sup> Cassidy (2023) 'Australian Catholic University sparks anger over scrapping medieval history and philosophy departments', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/14/australian-catholic-university-condemned-over-totally-indefensible-cuts-to-humanities-programs>

Then, in September that year, a targeted round of cuts to academic jobs (those who perform the research and teaching on which universities depend) in the humanities disciplines was announced. The plan proposed to reduce 52 academic positions to just 19. These cuts included the total disestablishment of its world-leading Dioana Institute of Philosophy and the Medieval and Early Modern Research program.<sup>37</sup>

Were it not for the large sums executives spent on travel, consultants and advertising, these cuts may not have been necessary.

**Figure 4: ACU spending on consultants, advertising and travel, 2021 to 2023.**



Source: annual reports.

## Spending on Consultants

From 2015 to 2022, ACU consistently spent more than \$10 million per year on external consultants. Indeed, its total spending for the decade to 2023 amounts to \$116 million.

If ACU had cut its consulting costs by \$5 million per year between 2017 and 2022, it would have eliminated its 2023 deficit. Even in the latter year, it spent \$9.7 million on consultants, the equivalent of nearly 65 full time Level C academics.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Cassidy (2023) 'Australian Catholic University sparks anger over scrapping medieval history and philosophy departments', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/14/australian-catholic-university-condemned-over-totally-indefensible-cuts-to-humanities-programs>

<sup>38</sup> ACU (2022) *Enterprise Agreement 2022-2025, Schedule 1 - Part A – Academic Staff Salary Rates*, Academic Level C Increment 4, 1-Jan-2023, [https://staff.acu.edu.au/people\\_and\\_capability/working-here/acu-staff-](https://staff.acu.edu.au/people_and_capability/working-here/acu-staff-)

Instead, professional staff and academics bore the cost of the failure to restrain that spending.

## Marketing Expenses

Changes in the ACU's categorisation of marketing expenses in annual reports mean that it is difficult to trace spending consistently before 2021. However, in the three years to 2023, ACU spent over \$26 million on advertising, marketing and promotional expenses.

This cumulative spending had muted effects on new commencements and university revenue.

- In 2021, ACU grew its new commencements from the previous year by 98 students (0.8%).
- It spent \$6 million on advertising that year only for new commencements in 2022 to decline by 76 students (-0.6%).
- Another \$9.7 million of advertisement expenditure for 2022 netted an increase of 303 students, or a 2.6% gain, in 2023. This amounts to \$800 in advertising costs per commencing student in 2023, or \$32,155 in advertising costs per new commencement above 2022 figures.

ACU is not the sector's biggest spender (Figure 5). It is a multi-campus university operating in a national environment, and as such it is a perfect illustration of the opportunity cost associated with advertising expenses in our higher education industry. Its problems are the sector's problems. Like other universities, it has sat on substantial wealth (its net assets are valued at nearly \$765 million) while making staff redundant.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, when executives used plateauing student enrolment rates as justification for their cutbacks, they were implicitly confirming the inefficacy of their expensive advertising campaigns.<sup>40</sup>

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enterprise-agreement-2022-2025/schedule-1-part-a-academic-staff-salary-rates. Calculation excludes leave entitlements.

<sup>39</sup> ACU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 31, <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/leadership-and-governance/governance/corporation/annual-reports>

<sup>40</sup> Carey (2023) 'Australian Catholic Uni cuts 100 jobs, 40 in Melbourne, as enrolments shrink, costs rise', *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/australian-catholic-uni-cuts-110-jobs-mostly-in-melbourne-as-enrolments-shrink-costs-rise-20230215-p5cko6.html>

# AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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Across 2022 and 2023, the ANU spent more than \$71.6 million on travel, over \$11 million on advertising and over \$107 million on consultants. That \$190 million, if saved, would have negated entirely the \$100 million cuts to jobs and 60% of the earmarked cuts to non-salary expenses (\$150 million) that the ANU subsequently announced.

## Deficit and Cuts

The ANU originally projected an operational deficit of around \$200 million for 2024.<sup>41</sup> University leaders developed a plan to cut \$100 million in salary costs and a further \$150 million in operating expenses.<sup>42</sup> This “renewal” plan included the abolition of the College of Health and Medicine and roughly 50 jobs along with it.<sup>43</sup>

In late March 2025 journalists reported that the deficit had been overstated by roughly \$60 million. Questioned about this on ABC radio, the Vice-Chancellor explained that ‘hard decisions’ across the university, made by ‘a whole lot of people’, had successfully constrained the operational deficit to \$140 million.<sup>44</sup> This would have provided little comfort to those who had already paid for the larger projection in the form of their job, with \$13 million cut from salary expenses between October 2024 and February 2025, and a further \$43 million slashed from non-salary outlays.<sup>45</sup>

## Spending on Consultants

The ANU’s most recent annual report shows that it spent \$53.9 million on consultants in 2023. That amounts to a fifth of its current \$250 million savings target. This also means that

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<sup>41</sup> ANU (2024) *FAQs: Renew ANU*, <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/faqs-renew-anu#:~:text=The%20University's%20projected%202024%20deficit,million%20by%201%20January%202026>.

<sup>42</sup> Twyford and Toomey (2024) ‘Australian National University to cut jobs and spending as it faces \$200 million deficit this year’, *ABC news*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-10-03/anu-announces-restructure-job-cuts-amid-soaring-deficit/104426854>

<sup>43</sup> ANU (2024) *Implementation Plan: Academic Portfolio*, p 2, p 15, <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/implementation-plans>

<sup>44</sup> Bell (2024) Interview by Ross Solly, *ABC Radio Canberra*, <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/interview-transcripts>

<sup>45</sup> Lansdown (2025) ‘“Incalculable damage”: More than 450 ANU staff demand answers on budget cuts’, *Canberra Times*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8925723/anu-staff-open-letter-attracts-more-than-450-signatures/>

the ANU spent a quarter of what was spent on consultants by all public universities in Victoria and Queensland combined.<sup>46</sup>

Consultants helped the ANU prepare its current round of cuts and redundancies. Questions on notice from senator David Pocock during budget estimates prompted university managers to admit that they had paid Nous Group consultants \$1,127,000 between September 2024 and January 2025 to advise on the 'Renew ANU' restructure.<sup>47</sup> Aside from Nous, four smaller consultants were contracted to provide advice on specific parts of the restructure, career development and communications around the Renew ANU program.<sup>48</sup> The ANU's consultancy spending for this restructure alone, around \$1.2 million, is almost as large as a small Victorian university's annual consultancy expenses.

At a Senate Estimates hearing in February 2025, ANU executives were asked about potential conflicts of interest arising from Chancellor Julie Bishop's procurement of consulting services from Vinder Consulting, a firm owned by her former chief of staff Murray Hansen, who is also a partner in Bishop's own consulting firm.<sup>49</sup> These questions were taken on notice by the ANU, and staff have since confirmed that Vinder was contracted by the communications division to perform \$35,000 worth of speechwriting for Bishop since 2019.<sup>50</sup>

## Executive Travel Spending

At an earlier Senate Estimates hearing in November 2024, ANU Vice-Chancellor Genevieve Bell said that, for academics, travel was part of "the way they do their research and the way they share their research".<sup>51</sup> But, at the same hearing, Bell confirmed that a quarter of the university's \$42 million travel spending in 2023 (roughly \$11 million) was spent only on

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<sup>46</sup> Adhikari (2024) *Australian public universities are now spending millions on consultants*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/australian-public-universities-are-now-spending-millions-on-consultants/>

<sup>47</sup> Lansdown (2025) 'ANU should be investigated for misleading the Senate over contracts: Pocock', *Canberra Times*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8932819/pocock-calls-for-probe-into-whether-anu-misled-on-contract-spend/>

<sup>48</sup> Lansdown (2025) 'ANU should be investigated for misleading the Senate over contracts: Pocock', *Canberra Times*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8932819/pocock-calls-for-probe-into-whether-anu-misled-on-contract-spend/>

<sup>49</sup> Hare (2025) 'ANU quizzed over contracts awarded to chancellor Julie Bishop's friend', *Australian Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/anu-quizzed-over-contracts-awarded-to-chancellor-julie-bishop-s-friend-20250225-p5l0w>

<sup>50</sup> Lansdown (2025) 'ANU defends \$35,000 in contracts to Julie Bishop's former chief of staff', *Canberra Times*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8907467/anu-defends-35k-contracts-tied-to-bishops-former-chief-of-staff/?cs=14329>

<sup>51</sup> Bell (7 November 2024) 'Australian National University', Senate, *Official Committee Hansard*, [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Hansard/Hansard\\_Display?bid=committees/estimate/28536/&sid=0006](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=committees/estimate/28536/&sid=0006)

executive travel.<sup>52</sup> While the 2024 annual report is not yet available, the Chief Operating Officer confirmed at the same Senate Estimates that a similar proportion (24%) of travel costs for that year were incurred by executives flying Business Class.<sup>53</sup>

The ANU lists travel costs among several non-salary budget items it hopes to reduce in 2025,<sup>54</sup> and its current travel policy handbook (amended in January 2025) allows only Deputy-Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice-Chancellors, the Chief Operating Officer, College Deans and Directors of Research Schools and Service Divisions to fly Business Class (or premium economy).<sup>55</sup> This appears not to represent any appreciable change in existing policy.

The *Australian Financial Review* was able to report in early March 2025 that Bishop, as ANU Chancellor, had spent \$150,000 in domestic and overseas travel costs in 2024. This was a portion of the \$620,000 that the ANU spent on Bishop's Perth-based office.<sup>56</sup> The travel costs alone were the equivalent of a mid-career lecturer's annual salary excluding oncosts.

## Advertising and Marketing Expenses

For the \$5.9 million that the ANU spent on marketing in 2022, it netted just 623 extra commencements the following year – or a bit under \$9,500 per additional new enrolment above 2022 figures.

Although the ANU's spending on advertising is small compared to larger budget items (repairs and maintenance cost \$40.6 million and scholarships and grants \$79 million in 2023), and modest by the sector's standards, advertising expenditure in 2023 was still no less than \$5.2 million, the equivalent of 48 entry-level lecturer positions.<sup>57</sup>

The university appears to have accepted that it invests too much time and money in marketing. A document prepared by the consulting firm Nous (and leaked to the *Australian Financial Review* in February 2025) appeared to suggest that the ANU should reduce its

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<sup>52</sup> Bell (7 November 2024) 'Australian National University', Senate, *Official Committee Hansard*, [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Hansard/Hansard\\_Display?bid=committees/estimate/28536/&sid=0006](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=committees/estimate/28536/&sid=0006)

<sup>53</sup> Bell (7 November 2024) 'Australian National University', Senate, *Official Committee Hansard*, [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Hansard/Hansard\\_Display?bid=committees/estimate/28536/&sid=0006](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=committees/estimate/28536/&sid=0006)

<sup>54</sup> ANU (2024) *FAQs: Renew ANU*, <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/faqs-renew-anu#:~:text=The%20University's%20projected%202024%20deficit,million%20by%201%20January%202026>

<sup>55</sup> ANU (2025) *Policy: ANU Travel, Handbook*, p 6, [https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP\\_000476](https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_000476)

<sup>56</sup> Hare (2025) 'ANU chancellor Julie Bishop racked up \$150,000 in travel expenses', *Australian Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/anu-chancellor-julie-bishop-racked-up-150-000-in-travel-expenses-20250303-p5lgh9>

<sup>57</sup> ANU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 123, p 141, <https://www.anu.edu.au/about/strategic-planning/annual-report-2023>; ANU (2023) *The Australian National University Enterprise Agreement 2023-2026*, Schedule 1, Level B1 (2-Feb-2023), <https://services.anu.edu.au/human-resources/enterprise-agreement>



permanent marketing division by up to 50%.<sup>58</sup> Whether this would save money on advertising expenditure, as opposed to professional salary costs, has not been made clear.

In October 2024, Chancellor Bishop caused significant offence when she remarked that “many members of staff have been part of the inefficiencies that the university is now seeking to address”.<sup>59</sup> But these examples show that money spent on consultants, executive travel, and advertising in just a few years could have instead paid the salaries of the jobs the ANU now wants to cut, with tens of millions left over. An institution that reports \$1.85 billion in financial assets alone should not need to make roughly 600 staff redundant in order to pay its way.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Hare (2025) ‘Leaking consulting firm slide deck gives hints on ANU job cuts’, *Australian Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/leaked-consulting-firm-slide-deck-gives-hints-on-anu-job-cuts-20250204-p5l9le>

<sup>59</sup> Daniel (2024) ‘ANU staff “part of inefficiencies”, chancellor Bishop says’, *Canberra Times*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8798030/julie-bishop-defends-anu-job-cuts-amid-unis-financial-crisis/>

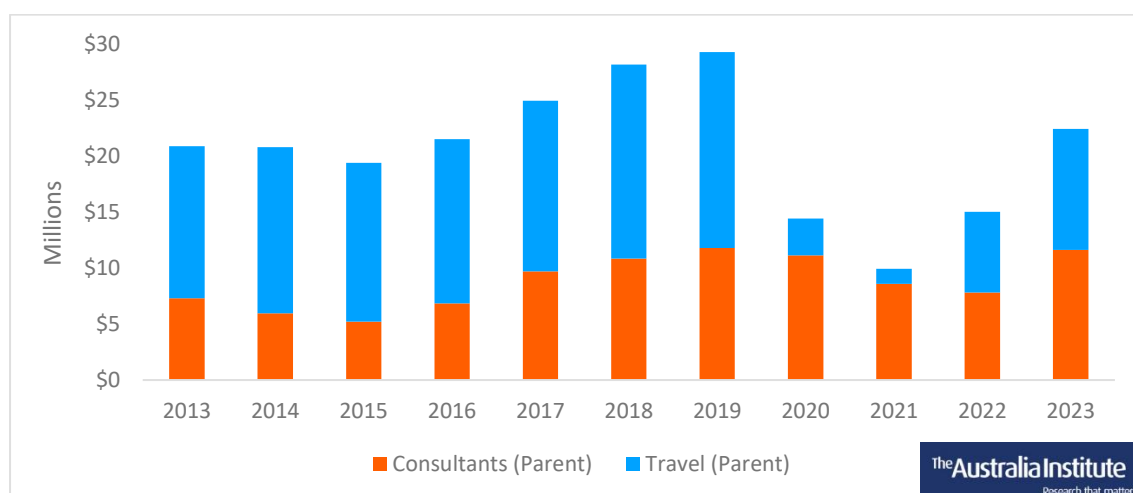
<sup>60</sup> ANU (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 14, <https://www.anu.edu.au/about/strategic-planning/annual-report-2023>; Cassidy (2024) ‘A thousand Australian university jobs are at risk. Who’s to blame for the dire financial state?’ *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/oct/26/a-thousand-australian-university-jobs-are-at-risk-whos-to-blame-for-the-dire-financial-state>

# UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

In the five years before the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Wollongong (UOW) spent between \$20 and \$30 million annually on consultants and travel combined. In 2023, following a pandemic lull in travel, these expenses resurged to more than \$22 million in total. Most staff and students had little to do with these choices but are now being asked to bear the costs.

UOW posted a deficit of \$39.1 million for 2023.<sup>61</sup> (This large figure does not account for the deficit incurred by UOW's subsidiary entities, which produced a larger deficit of \$95.1 million).<sup>62</sup> In response, UOW commenced plans to abolish 90 full-time academic positions (for a saving of \$21 million) and more recently began consultations for “workplace changes” (which could include professional staff cuts) to save a further \$30 million.<sup>63</sup> According to one estimate, the second round of cuts could cost up to 185 jobs.<sup>64</sup>

**Figure 5: UOW expenditure on consultants and travel for the decade to 2023.**



Source: annual reports.

<sup>61</sup> UOW (2024) *Annual Report 2023*, p 26, <https://www.uow.edu.au/about/annual-reports-and-financial-statements/>

<sup>62</sup> UOW (2024) *Annual Report 2023*, p 23, <https://www.uow.edu.au/about/annual-reports-and-financial-statements/>

<sup>63</sup> Fernandez and Fuller (2025) ‘University of Wollongong academics slam consultation in \$21 million restructure’, *ABC news*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-01-15/university-of-wollongong-confirms-21-million-in-academic-job-cut/104820778>; Long (2025) *UOW begins preliminary consultation on potential workplace change*, <https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/uow-begins-preliminary-consultation-on-potential-workplace-change.php>

<sup>64</sup> Langford (2025) ‘UOW criticised for deep cuts in Wollongong while overseas sites untouched’, *Illawarra Mercury*, <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/8926916/uow-job-cuts-spark-criticism-over-international-campuses/>

## Spending on Consultants

In 2023 UOW spent \$11.6 million on consultants' fees. In 2015, that figure had been \$5.2 million.

Its 2024 annual report is not yet public, but when published, it will show consultancy spending that we know includes the fee that UOW paid consulting firm KordaMentha for advice on course and staff cuts.<sup>65</sup> This has been controversial because the university then appointed a KordaMentha employee as its interim Vice-Chancellor, and allowed him to remain in the firm's employ one day per fortnight.<sup>66</sup> UOW management disagreed with media claims that this could be perceived as a significant conflict of interest, and told *Saturday Paper* journalist Rick Morton that the interim-Vice-Chancellor did "not undertake any paid work for KordaMentha" during his period in the role, which concluded in February.<sup>67</sup>

Consultants have been on hand to advise UOW on its cost-cutting initiatives. They have also been procured for assistance with its wage underpayment remediation programs. According to a former academic staff member who gave evidence at the first hearing of the Senate inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers, KPMG had performed 'a cycle of audits of casual pay systems' but ultimately failed to prevent further wage underpayments. Deloitte was then contracted to assist with the growing remediation bill, which was roughly \$10 million at the time of the hearing.<sup>68</sup> Consultants have clearly profited from staff and universities who bear the costs of underpayment and reputational damage respectively.

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<sup>65</sup> ABC Illawarra (2025) *University of Wollongong reveals plans for 91.6 academic job cuts to save \$21m*, <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/illawarra-breakfast/john-dewar/104819654>

<sup>66</sup> Langford (2024) 'Conflict claim: V-C a partner in consultancy firm reviewing UOW operations', *Illawarra Mercury*, <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/8751802/conflict-of-interest-claim-uow-v-cv-is-a-partner-in-review-firm/Langford> (2025) 'V-C continued to work for KordaMentha despite UOW saying he was on leave', *Illawarra Mercury*, <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/8884023/uow-v-c-conflict-he-kept-one-day-a-fortnight-for-kordamentha/>

<sup>67</sup> Langford (2025) 'V-C continued to work for KordaMentha despite UOW saying he was on leave', *Illawarra Mercury*, <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/8884023/uow-v-c-conflict-he-kept-one-day-a-fortnight-for-kordamentha/>; Morton (2025) 'Everything that's wrong with university management', *Saturday Paper*, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/education/2025/03/22/everything-thats-wrong-with-university-management>

<sup>68</sup> Probyn-Rapsey (13 March 2025) 'Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers', Senate, *Proof Committee Hansard*, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=COMMITTEES;id=committees%2Fcommsen%2F28764%2F0001;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Fcommsen%2F28764%2F0000%22>

## Travel Spending

UOW executives have also pointed to travel, along with procurement, IT and “other discretionary expenditure” as areas for savings.<sup>69</sup>

Between 2013 and 2019, UOW spent \$107 million on travel, or roughly \$15 million per year. Travel spending fell dramatically to \$1.3 million in 2021, but resurged to nearly \$10.8 million in 2023. That year’s travel spending alone was equivalent to 55 professorial salaries, or 100 full-time entry-level academics under UOW’s enterprise agreement.<sup>70</sup>

UOW’s travel and entertainment policy is accessible only to current staff, and its annual reports do not disclose the domestic and overseas travel costs encompassed under the generic “travel and entertainment” category. However, the 2023 annual report does specify that there were 806 overseas visits in 2023, of which 20.5% were for “business meetings”.<sup>71</sup>

## ‘Unviable programs’

At the end of 2024, following a round of consultations, UOW finalised its change management program. Several courses and disciplines initially identified by KordaMentha as “in-scope” for abolition were spared, but four disciplines – Cultural Studies, Japanese, Mandarin and Science & Technology Studies (STS) – were deemed “unviable”.<sup>72</sup> Combined with other changes to course and subject offerings and new work practices, UOW hoped to save \$51 million. The then-Vice-Chancellor and KordaMentha partner John Dewar claimed that these savings would ensure that UOW remained “competitive, innovative and committed to delivering an outstanding student experience”.<sup>73</sup> How those cuts achieved that goal was not explained.

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<sup>69</sup> Long (2025) *UOW begins preliminary consultation on potential workplace change*, <https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/uow-begins-preliminary-consultation-on-potential-workplace-change.php>

<sup>70</sup> Fair Work Commission Agreement AG2024/1909, University of Wollongong Enterprise Agreement 2023-26, Schedule 1, Level B 01# and Level E (8-Jul-22, without pro rata bonus), <https://www.uow.edu.au/about/enterprise-bargaining/>. Calculation excludes on-costs and leave entitlements.

<sup>71</sup> UOW (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 30, <https://www.uow.edu.au/about/annual-reports-and-financial-statements/>

<sup>72</sup> Long (2025) *Staffing and teaching changes achieve \$21m in recurrent savings*, [https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/final-teaching-workplace-change-plan-announced.php#:~:text=4%20disciplines%20remain%20unviable%20\(Cultural,Studies\)%20and%20will%20be%20disestablished.](https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/final-teaching-workplace-change-plan-announced.php#:~:text=4%20disciplines%20remain%20unviable%20(Cultural,Studies)%20and%20will%20be%20disestablished.)

<sup>73</sup> Long (2025) *Staffing and teaching changes achieve \$21m in recurrent savings*, [https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/final-teaching-workplace-change-plan-announced.php#:~:text=4%20disciplines%20remain%20unviable%20\(Cultural,Studies\)%20and%20will%20be%20disestablished.](https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2025/final-teaching-workplace-change-plan-announced.php#:~:text=4%20disciplines%20remain%20unviable%20(Cultural,Studies)%20and%20will%20be%20disestablished.)

The university's assets, across its entire consolidated entity (which includes subsidiaries) is more than \$810 million.<sup>74</sup> If UOW had cut \$5 million from its annual travel costs and another \$5 million from its consulting expenditure in the years before the pandemic, it would have covered the costs of all of its urgent savings measures now. The teaching of important Asian languages, cultural studies and STS might still be considered "viable".

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<sup>74</sup> UOW (2024) *Annual report 2023*, p 56, <https://www.uow.edu.au/about/annual-reports-and-financial-statements/>

# Conclusion

Great countries have great institutions. Australia's universities have previously ranked among some of the world's best. In 2016-17, ANU ranked within the world's top 50 universities according to *Times Higher Education* – but it has since fallen to 73<sup>rd</sup> place. ACU, which painstakingly clawed its way from below 600<sup>th</sup> place in 2016-17 to somewhere in the top 300 by 2021, has fallen back to less than 400<sup>th</sup> in those rankings. UOW has earned itself a place in the top 250 for the past six years, but large cuts to staff and diminished education quality may prompt falls in that figure.<sup>75</sup>

Previous Australia Institute polling research has shown that Australians care about the quality of higher education. In 2023, five in six Australians (83 per cent) agreed that universities focus on profit at the expense of education.<sup>76</sup>

Australians can and should expect their state and federal governments to invest more substantively in higher education and research, but university managers need to use their finances to support the quality higher education that students demand and that the public expect. The analysis above shows just how much has gone to advertising, consultants, and travel.

Even in the absence of reforms to the governance of higher education, universities could take up measures to improve the quality and transparency of their financial decisions.

They could make consistent and itemised disclosures of their annual spending on consultants so that students, staff and the public can see what has been paid for in their name.

University finances would benefit if there were clearer expectations about travel entitlements for the highest-paid on their campuses, and caps placed on executive travel expenses to ensure fairer and equitable distribution of the funds budgeted for this purpose. Requiring universities to disclose all overseas travel costs, as is currently done in Queensland, would improve transparency.

Universities should not need to buy expensive television advertising or pay sporting teams to wear their logo purely to attract a handful of domestic students in a shrinking national market. If the federal government's proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission is

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<sup>75</sup> All rankings are derived from Times Higher Education (2025) *World University Rankings 2025*, [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/latest/world-ranking#!/length/-1/sort\\_by/rank/sort\\_order/asc/cols/scores](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/latest/world-ranking#!/length/-1/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/scores)

<sup>76</sup> Littleton (2023) *Public attitudes on issues in higher education*, p 26, p 23, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/public-attitudes-on-issues-in-higher-education/>

to be a good “steward of Australia’s tertiary education system”, it must help manage student loads and demand fluctuations across the sector.<sup>77</sup>

The budgetary decisions made by university boards might seem economic, but in practice they often allow rank and file staff and students to bear the costs of expensive executive decisions. When university leaders spend too much on advertising, consultants or indeed their own travel, the consequence is not just a budget deficit, but rather a campus where research output, teaching quality, work satisfaction and the student experience are all poorer.

The annual reports and financial statements of our universities are written in the language of modern finance. They involve categories of income and spending that are sometimes arbitrary and imprecise. They also reveal that public universities currently hold billions in assets physical and financial. Institutions that value their paper assets over their real assets, their staff and students, are institutions in need of repair.

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<sup>77</sup> Australian Government (2024) *Establishing the Australian Tertiary Education Commission*, <https://www.education.gov.au/about-department/resources/establishing-australian-tertiary-education-commission>