

Reforming university governance in Australia

Treating education and research as a public good to fix a broken sector

The university sector is in a governance crisis, fuelled by its lack of accountability to staff, students, federal or state governments. Taking the right lessons from international experience, Australia can build an equitable university sector that treats education and research as a public good.

Discussion paper

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April 2025

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Summary

Decades of neoliberal reform have created a governance crisis at Australian universities. Australia's universities are plagued with scandals and are failing staff, students, and the broader community.

Under the current governance structure, neither the federal nor state governments are properly accountable for Australia's tertiary sector. This model dates back to the 19th century, when university education was only available to a tiny proportion of the population. This structure is not fit for the purpose of providing higher education to as many Australians as possible.

Australian universities are treated as a disjointed set of quasi-private enterprises, each of which operates under a separate piece of state government legislation, and all of which are expected to compete against one another in a 'market' for higher education. However, the application of market principles to universities is inappropriate, as the sector fails to meet the requisite criteria for a successful market, most notably due to the presence of serious information problems. Australia's public universities are today run according to 'managerialist' theories from the private sector, which ignore the specific characteristics of education as a public good, as well as the idiosyncrasies and institutional memories of particular universities. Applying such corporate models of management to the university sector has led to wasteful and damaging 'change for change's sake' and destroyed the collegial model of academic governance.

To the extent that Australian policymakers have paid attention to international experience, they have followed the path taken by second-tier English universities, with generally unsatisfactory results. Pursuit of this failed model has been combined with suggestions that we should try to match the US Ivy League, which is massively better funded while teaching far fewer students.

Despite facing many challenges, California's public university system had combined mass education with research output excellence. With appropriate adjustments, the California system would provide a more appropriate model for the governance of Australia's universities. The University of California system has a distinct constitutional status as a public trust, which provides it with legal stability, and it operates as a single institution with multiple campuses throughout a state with a population larger than that of Australia. The UC system was established to provide universal access to post-secondary education, which means students from any background have a chance to obtain a higher education. Australia could borrow much from this model.

Fixing university governance and creating an equitable university sector that treats education as a public service will require:

1. Creating a national system of university education managed by the federal government

2. Ending the corporate model of governance and refocussing on education and research
3. Guaranteeing access to university education
4. Promoting co-operation, not competition
5. Federal control over international student admissions
6. Returning to the collegial model of academic governance
7. Creating a central system of sector-wide bargaining for the university sector

Introduction

Mismanagement scandals are shaking the university sector while its senior managers receive some of the highest salaries in the world; on average, Vice-Chancellors receive remuneration of about \$1 million. Surging public concern about these issues has led to a Senate inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers. However, these concerns reflect symptoms rather than the underlying problems of university governance that have given rise to them. The purpose of this paper is to address some of the deeper problems that have led to the current poor state of universities.

The central problem is that, for governance purposes, Australian universities are treated as a disjointed set of enterprises, each operating under a separate piece of state government legislation. Whereas universities once thought of themselves as communities of scholars, they are now seen as competing business enterprises, effectively owned by their senior managers.

The central point of this paper is to argue for the creation of a national university system and a government commitment to provide universal access to post-secondary education for all Australians. Given its role in society, the economy and the amount of public support for its provision, university education, along with other post-secondary education, should be seen as a public service. The current governance structure of Australian universities dates back to the 19th century, a time when university education was an elite option, available only to a tiny proportion of the population.

Principles for a national system include:

- ending the corporate model;
- guaranteed access to university education;
- co-operation instead of competition;
- central control of international student admissions;
- a return to collegiality in academic governance; and
- a national system of wage determination to replace enterprise bargaining for staff and rein in payments to senior managers.

Historical background

The most comprehensive and up-to-date history of the Australian university system is that of Forsyth (2014). This paper draws significantly on Forsyth's historical background but offers some new perspectives on governance.

The history of the Australian university system may be divided into three phases.

PHASE 1: THE SANDSTONE ERA, 1850-1945

First, between 1850 and 1911, each of the states established a university by an act of parliament. These “sandstone” institutions were modelled (at least aspirationally and architecturally) on Oxford and Cambridge. They were funded by a mixture of student fees and state government subsidies.

Universities in this period were mainly teaching institutions. They educated only a small proportion of the population (about 0.2 per cent) and were chronically underfunded (Forsyth 2014). The model of academic work was one of “scholarship”, that is, wide reading of research in the field to ensure mastery of the material that was taught. Academics were not, in general, expected or funded to do research themselves, and there was only limited funding for post-graduate education.

A crucial observation, which will be central to the analysis in this paper, is that the formal governance structures of Australian universities remain largely unchanged from those that were established more than a century ago for the radically different institutions of that day. Universities still operate under state acts of parliament, with the oversight of a Senate or council largely appointed by the state government. Significantly, while state governments are legally responsible for overseeing Australian universities, they provide little or no university funding. With occasional exceptions, state governments neither see themselves nor are seen by voters as having any responsibility for the provision or quality of university education.

PHASE 2: EXPANSION, 1945-83

In the second phase, beginning in World War II and continuing to the 1980s, the Commonwealth took over the primary funding role and encouraged expansion of university education, along with the creation of new universities, including Griffith, Macquarie, La Trobe and Flinders. These new institutions were typically more open to innovations in education and to more open forms of governance than the established “sandstones”.

In this phase, most students relied on scholarships from the Commonwealth government and state education departments, but student fees remained until the 1970s. The high-water mark of this phase was the abolition of tuition fees by the Whitlam government in 1974, along with the introduction of student living allowance (Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme) in 1973 (Macintyre, Brett and Croucher 2017).

University education was free of charge after Whitlam's reform, but it was not freely available. Admission was tightly rationed by entry scores, and there were few avenues available to those whose performance in Year 12 examinations was inadequate. The limits on access to university are often overlooked by those who express nostalgia for the “golden age” and also by those who see the “Baby Boom” generation as a whole as having enjoyed a right to free education denied to later cohorts. While in 2020, about two in five (41.7%) of 19-year-old Australians were in higher education, this figure was less than one in six (15.6%) in 1975 (Norton 2023).¹

As well as funding university teaching, the Commonwealth greatly expanded funding for research through the Australian Research Grants Committee, the predecessor of the Australian Research Council. Moreover, research activity became a standard part of the job expectations of academics. This change was justified by the idea that academics’ own research would inform their teaching.

In parallel with the growth of the university system, there was an expansion of other forms of tertiary education institutions, which largely replaced older models of on-the-job training in professions such as teaching, nursing and engineering. This shift towards formal training mirrored the earlier shift in more prestigious professions such as law and medicine, which became central parts of the university.

Having been established as teachers’ colleges, technical schools and so on, these institutions were keen both to elevate their status and to increase the range of subjects they taught. The first big step in this direction was the establishment in 1949 of the University of New South Wales (UNSW), which had begun life as the Sydney Mechanics' School of Art in 1933.

The rise to university status of UNSW was relatively unusual in this period. For the most part, teachers colleges became Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs), and technical schools became Institutes of Technology. The result was a “binary” system, in which universities combined teaching and research, while colleges and institutes confined themselves to undergraduate education.

¹ These figures compare all students in 1975 with domestic students in 2020. However, given the small number of international students in the 1970s, these figures are comparable.

PHASE 3: TRANSFORMATION, 1980S TO PRESENT

The third phase began with the election of the Hawke government in 1983 and has continued to the present. The driving force was a desire to expand post-school education (including universities, technical and vocational education and other forms of 'higher education') without any significant increase in public spending. The main policy initiatives were:

- the reintroduction of tuition charges, with the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) system of income-contingent loans replacing up-front fees,
- the 'Dawkins reforms' which ended the binary system. CAEs and Institutes of Technology were converted to university status, while mergers were encouraged to achieve perceived scale economies and absorb small institutions such as schools of art and music, and
- greatly expanded reliance on fee-paying international students to balance university budgets.

Running in parallel with the Dawkins reforms was a sustained, but almost entirely unsuccessful, push for privatisation, reflecting the resurgence of free-market thinking commonly described as "neoliberalism". A series of ventures, including Bond University, U21Global and Melbourne University Private failed outright or were absorbed into the publicly funded system.²

As the push for privatisation faded, it was replaced by managerialism. This process involved a substantial expansion in the ranks and pay of senior management, while academic staff numbers failed to keep pace with growth in student numbers. University managers increasingly adopted the language and job titles of private corporations. In particular, large increases in salaries were justified by comparison with the payment of corporate CEOs (Hare 2016).

Discontent with university governance has surged, epitomised by the high rewards paid to senior managers and underpayment scandals. According to the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) more than 300 university executives are now paid more than their state premiers (NTEU 2024), while there is "more than \$400 million in wage theft" in the sector (NTEU 2025). University governance has now reached a level of public attention that has

² Bond University was able to benefit from a confluence of factors, such as having a period with no strong public competitor on the Gold Coast and has since benefited from access to government-backed concessional student loans through FEE-HELP.

resulted in the calling of a Senate inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers.

Neoliberalism and managerialism

The Dawkins reforms in Australia took place in the context of a resurgence of free-market policy now usually referred to as “neoliberalism”. In the public sector, neoliberalism is closely associated with managerialism (Sims 2019).

The central doctrine of managerialism is that the differences between such organisations as, for example, a university and a motor-vehicle company, are less important than the similarities, and that the performance of all organisations can be optimised by the application of generic management skills and theory. Put simply, it is the person's skill as a manager, not their knowledge of the task or process they are managing, that is highly valued. It follows that the crucial element of institutional reform is the removal of obstacles to ‘the right to manage’.

The rise of managerialism has gone hand in hand with that of the radical program of market-oriented reforms variously referred to as Thatcherism, economic rationalism and neoliberalism. Despite very different histories, all these terms are now generally used in a pejorative sense. Managerialism may appear inconsistent with traditional free-market thinking in which the ideal form of organisation is that of competitive markets supplied by small firms, where the manager is also the owner. However, managerialism is entirely consistent with the dominant strand in the neoliberal approach to public policy, which takes the corporation, rather than the small owner-managed firm, as the “ideal/preferred” model for all forms of economic and social organisation.

The main features of managerialist policy are incessant organisational restructuring, sharpening of incentives, and expansion in the number, power and remuneration of senior managers, with a corresponding downgrading of the role of skilled workers, and particularly of professionals.

In the public sector context, managerialism becomes “New Public Sector Management” (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). The central assumption of new public sector management is that, if organisations are given the right (financial) incentives, they can deliver socially desirable outcomes without reliance either on direct political control or on any assumption that the organisation is committed to some concept of public service. In practice, in the sentence above, the first occurrence of ‘organisation’ should be replaced by ‘managers of organisations’ while the second refers to the members of the organisation considered collectively.

EDUCATION AS A SERVICE, AS AN INDUSTRY AND AS A BUSINESS

Education is an important economic activity. Public expenditure on education accounts for around 5 per cent of Australian GDP (World Bank 2024), and the education sector employs around 7.5 per cent of the paid workforce (ABS 2025). Broader measures, taking account of the costs borne and work done by students as part of the education process, yield even larger estimates. Moreover, although not all education is concerned with the acquisition of employable skills, education is crucial to the development of the workforce on which the economy depends.

In important respects, therefore, education must be considered as an industry and a central part of a market economy. Historically, the term “industry” was most commonly associated with production in a factory, where workers are employed to supply labour under the direction of managers to produce a physical product that is sold, ideally at a profit, to consumers by the firm that owns the factory. This association is sometimes used with disdain to refer to universities as “degree factories”, a slur on the skills and craft values of factory workers. Nevertheless, there are crucial differences.

Many of the workers in a university are professionals who are assumed to have a commitment to their profession over and above the need to earn a living. Particularly at the university level, academics have a high degree of autonomy and have substantial control over what they teach and how. Managerialism is inherently hostile to professional autonomy.

The nature of the ‘product’ produced by the education industry is often unclear and is the subject of vigorous dispute. Some accounts focus on the direct acquisition of knowledge and skills in a particular discipline, while others stress a more general transformative role in which students learn to think critically and question the assumptions they bring to a problem (Paul and Quiggin 2020). Others, by contrast, claim that the whole enterprise is nothing more than an elaborate exercise in “screening”, picking out the more able students through their capacity to pass exams. Despite numerous absurd implications, this theory is popular among critics of university education (Quiggin 1999)

Another distinctive feature of education, including university education, is the relationship between producers and consumers. Rather than producing for an anonymous market, teachers historically have had a direct personal relationship with their students, involving a range of mutual obligations, as well as broader obligations to society at large. Lastly, the nature of the employment relationship is sometimes unclear, such as whether the employment obligations are owed by and to the individual institution, the government that provides basic funding, or some combination of the two.

The opposite error, now dominant in education policy and in the thinking of university managers, is to ignore the special characteristics of education and to assume that the business model of 20th-century factory production can be transferred to universities and other educational institutions. This is reflected in the increasingly common adoption of corporate job titles and jargon such as Chief Financial Officer, Human Resources and, more recently, “talent acquisition”.

Professionalism

In practice, advocates of new public sector management apply direct incentives only to top management and assume that there exists a set of generic management skills that can produce the desired outcomes even when the individual interests of most of the organisation’s staff are not directly tied to those outcomes. For example, while a Vice-Chancellor may receive bonuses for boosting revenues or cutting expenditures, lecturers generally do not receive performance bonuses.

In particular, managerialism, like neoliberalism in general, involves the rejection of notions of professionalism. Managerialists and neoliberals reject as special pleading the idea that there is any fundamental difference between the operations of a university and the manufacturing and marketing of soft drinks. This is most evident in the adoption of corporate branding processes. For example, the University of Adelaide (2025) states, “Our brand is our greatest asset”, a claim repeated by the University of Melbourne (2025) with the qualification “arguably our greatest asset”. Rather more plausibly, the same claim is made with respect to the Coca-Cola corporation and its distinctive bottle and logo (Kantar 2025). What matters is not the actual quality of research, teaching or carbonated drinks but “a cohesive and consistent visual identity”.

In both higher education and beverage markets, it is claimed that the optimal policy is to design organisations that respond directly to consumer demand and to operate such institutions using the generic management techniques applicable to corporations of all kinds.

In the university context, the replacement of professionalism by a managerial system of incentives and accountability has produced massive disillusionment and low morale among academic staff in particular.

What does education produce

The truly crucial questions relate to the relationship between the education ‘industry’ and its ‘consumers’. In the simplest versions of the neoliberal model, this relationship is straightforward. Students acquire technical knowledge useful in some occupation, in exactly the same way as they might acquire tools, equipment or vehicles for business use. Hence, in

principle, they should be able to estimate the future return on their investment and choose a course accordingly.

However, acquiring education is not like acquiring tools, equipment, or vehicles due to the presence of substantial and unresolvable information problems. Students, by definition, cannot know in advance what they are going to learn or make an informed judgement about what they are learning. They have to rely, to a substantial extent, on their teachers to select the right topics of study and to teach them appropriately.

Moreover, any specific course of education is, for most, a once-only experience in most cases. Students may judge, in retrospect, that particular teachers, courses or institutions were good or bad, but in either case, they are unlikely to return, so that there is no direct market return to high-quality performance.

The result is that education fails to meet the requirements for an efficient market, and as such, does not rely on market competition to any significant extent to sort good teachers and institutions from bad ones. Rather, education depends on a combination of sustained institutional standards and individual professional ethics to maintain their performance. This, in turn, means that reputation, rather than market prices or direct observation of quality, drives educational choices.

The university sector also fails to meet several of the other conditions that would be needed for a competitive market. For instance, many regional areas are likely to have only one university, effectively a local monopoly. Failing to meet the requirements of an efficient market is not a unique problem for the university sector or education more broadly; it is common across a range of sectors historically provided for by the public sector, such as utilities, healthcare, and other social services. The requirements of an efficient market and how this can be used to predict failures of privatisation are examined at greater length in the Australia Institute paper *Privatised Failure* (Australia Institute 2024).

The failure of neoliberalism in education

THE FAILURE OF FOR-PROFIT EDUCATION

After thirty or more years of neoliberal reform, it is time to pronounce a verdict of failure.

A central element of neoliberalism was the belief that for-profit enterprises would respond better to market incentives than either governments or not-for-profit non-government organisations. This belief was reflected in the widespread privatisation of government business enterprises in fields such as telecommunication and energy supply. Only in the last decade or so has there been a substantial swing away from privatisation in these fields (Quiggin 2024).

The rise and particularly fall of for-profit enterprises in education was more rapid, beginning in the early 1990s and largely over a decade later. In the US, the most notable developments were the rise of the University of Phoenix and, at the school level, Edison Schools.

Edison Schools was a for-profit school business set up in 1992 by leading advocates of market-oriented reform. The enterprise rapidly expanded with the aid of venture capital, owning over 1,000 schools at its peak. The collapse was equally rapid, and by 2005, the company had confined its activities to the management of publicly owned ‘charter schools’ (Glassman 2005). As the performance of charter schools has come under critical scrutiny, many have broken ties with for-profit providers of management services. As a result of which EdisonSchools, renamed EdisonLearning is now focused on the provision of course materials (Gewertz 2008).

Another failed experiment at the school level took place in Sweden. In the 1990s, Sweden introduced a system of “free schools”, allowing for-profit operators to run schools. The system was widely hailed as a success by advocates of reform in the UK and the US. However, it became evident over time that the profits of free schools were earned at the expense of poorer performance for the school system as a whole. In 2023, the education minister pronounced the system a failure and took steps to reduce the role of for-profit enterprises (Bryant 2023).

For-profit education has been equally disastrous in the university sector. The leading business in the field was the University of Phoenix. The University of Phoenix was founded in 1976, taking advantage of a favourable regulatory environment in Arizona. Its rise to national and global prominence came with the launch of an online program in 1989.

The reputation of the University of Phoenix declined steadily after 2000, as it became clear that few students were benefiting from the “education” they were receiving, largely funded through federal government grants under the Pell Scheme (Dillon 2007). Although the University claimed a peak enrolment of 410,000 students in 2010, it was, by then, openly fraudulent (Lederman 2009). The business collapsed over the next decade. The University of Phoenix was ranked 386th out of 391 schools in the 2021 Washington Monthly list of national universities (Washington Monthly 2021).

In its 1990s heyday, advocates of privatisation in Australia were enthusiastic about the University of Phoenix model. University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Alan Gilbert referred to academics as modern-day equivalents of the handloom weavers displaced by the industrial revolution (Gilbert 2000). Stephen Schwartz, VC of Macquarie and Murdoch universities, described universities as “Last of the Great Socialist Enterprises” and noted the cost savings in the model:

The largest private university in the USA is the University of Phoenix which enrolls more than 40,000 students at campuses around the country. These students study at night in easily accessible rented office accommodation. To make things simple, students study one subject at a time. All of the subjects are popular ones - business and IT mainly. The staff consists of part-time teachers who work for casual rates; they teach from standardised curricula and they are not paid to do research. There are no sports facilities, student lounges, or refectories, so the University of Phoenix has a low cost structure. This means it can charge modest fees and still deliver a profit to its shareholders. (Schwartz 2000)

Noteworthy failures of the neoliberal model in Australia included Melbourne University Private (MUP) and U21Global. MUP, an initiative of VC Alan Gilbert, was a for-profit subsidiary of the University of Melbourne which operated from 1998 to 2005 and was ultimately closed with losses of at least \$20 million and perhaps as much as \$150 million (Cain and Hewitt 2004). Part of MUP's business was the development of course material for U21Global, an online university launched by the Universitas21 group. U21Global was also a failure and was ultimately sold to a private firm after incurring losses of around \$100 million (Kolowich 2009).

Management and institutional memory

Universities are exceptionally long-lived institutions. The University of Bologna which began teaching around 1088, is generally regarded as the oldest University in continuous operation, followed by Oxford and Cambridge in the early 13th century. Furthermore, universities almost never die, except as a result of public policy intervention. This may be contrasted with the case of listed corporations, which last, on average, less than 35 years (AICD 2015). This stability is reflected in employment patterns, at least for those academics

who succeed in navigating the arduous process leading to tenure. Whereas most workers stay only five to ten years in a given job (ABS 2024), it is not uncommon for an academic to work in the same university for 20 years or more.

Universities are also characterised by long-running research programs. An extreme example is the University of Queensland Pitch Drop experiment, now approaching its 100th year (UQ School of Mathematics and Physics 2025). A less dramatic but more representative example is my own research on the Murray-Darling Basin, commenced in the early 1980s, which is still continuing.

In education, institutions and institutional reputations are exceptionally durable. The leading universities in Australia, and most developed countries, are those that were already well established at the turn of the 20th century or even earlier. The same is true of private schools and even, to a large extent, of elite state schools.

These facts undermine the idea of universities as businesses. Universities almost never go out of business as a result of commercial failure. Even a sustained improvement or decline in relative rankings is rare, except where it results from externally imposed structural changes. The Dawkins reforms, for example, raised the status of (what became) universities of technology relative to that of the new universities created in the Menzies era. But this change in reputation had little, if anything, to do with the management of individual universities in either group.

Where universities have disappeared, it is primarily the result of mergers, typically driven by external political events. The recent merger of the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia, discussed later, is a typical example.

The possibilities of bankruptcy, hostile takeover or a substantial decline in market share represent the primary sources of market discipline for managers in the corporate sector. None of these threats applies to universities or most other educational institutions. Additionally, the idiosyncratic nature of each university, built on long-term institutional memory and culture, means that the one-size-fits-all governance approach of managerialism is unlikely to be effective. Far from generating competition, managerialist reforms have broken down institutional cultures and driven convergence to a uniform model. Instead, good governance is most likely to come from those within these institutions who can leverage their understanding of institutional memory and culture.

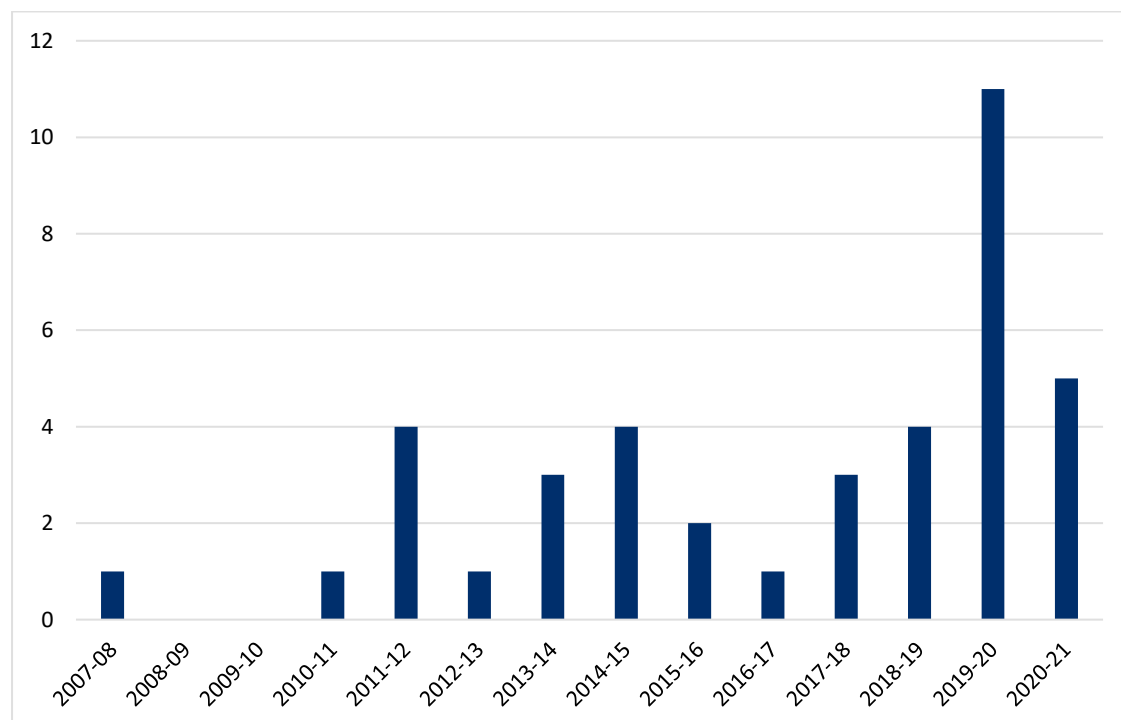
Managerialism and short-termism

Historically, university leadership reflected the long-lived nature of the institution. Vice-Chancellors commonly held office for 15-20 years or even longer. In the collegial system of management, substantial power was held by professors who not only led departments for long periods but typically held faculty deanships on a rotating basis.

This pattern has changed radically during the period of managerialism. Most senior managers from Vice-Chancellors to Executive Deans, and, increasingly Heads of School are appointed on five-year contracts, with the possibility of a single renewal. A third five-year term is highly unusual. On the other hand, the inevitable accidents of managerial life mean that many fail to complete even a single term. It is not uncommon for an undergraduate student, taking perhaps six years to complete their course, to outlast the term of one, or even two Vice-Chancellors or other senior managers. Quinton and Brabazon (2022) reported that, at the time of writing, “there are currently 40 Australian Vice Chancellors, the majority of whom have been appointed into their current role since 2018 (Figure 1).”

Individual leaders vary widely in their management styles, vision and general competence. If leadership played a central part in university performance and reputation, we would observe much more variation in performance and reputation than actually takes place.

Figure 1: Australian Vice-Chancellors by year of appointment, 2022



Source: Quinton and Brabazon 2022

Change for change's sake

The idea of the university as an institution which evolves over decades or centuries, contrasts radically with the managerialist rhetoric of “change management”, which assumes that change, at least when imposed from the top, is always for the good. As a result, each new manager seeks to leave their mark in the relatively brief term available to them, using their claimed achievements as a stepping stone to a higher level position or a same-level position in a higher-ranked universities. Strategic plans are made, partially implemented,

and then forgotten as their advocates depart. What remains is a residue of confusion and disillusionment.

The constant restructuring of Australian universities contrasts sharply with the stability that characterises most of the world's leading universities. Particularly at the departmental level, structures in leading universities, including US state flagships, have remained broadly constant for decades. The same is true of Oxford and Cambridge, though not of the lower-ranked UK universities on which much of the Australian change agenda has been modelled.

In this context, it may be useful to recall a quotation often misattributed to the Roman writer Petronius Arbiter (in fact, authored by Ogburn (1957)).

We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized. Presumably the plans for our employment were being changed. I was to learn later in life that, perhaps because we are so good at organizing, we tend as a nation to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralization.

Federalism and the weakness of university governance

A major weakness in university governance, apparently unique to Australia, is the fact that university governance operates under the rules of state governments, which have almost no role and little interest in the funding and performance of "their" universities. By contrast, in other federal systems, such as those of the United States, Germany and Canada, state governments have retained both primary responsibility for funding universities and legal authority over them.

In Australia, by contrast, the national government is almost entirely responsible for the provision of public funding for university education and the formulation of public policy relating to universities. Yet, in formal terms, public universities are independent statutory corporations, each created by a separate act of the relevant state parliament.

The absurdities of this structure have become evident during the term of the Albanese government. From 2022 to 2024, the government engaged in a lengthy process of public engagement, seeking to formulate future directions for the university sector. But, in the middle of this process, and without any formal reference to the national government, the state government of South Australia decided to merge its two largest universities (the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia). The consequences for education in South Australia will be profound, but there was no apparent attempt to relate the (rather thin) "business case" for the merger to the goal of providing education to South Australian students, nor any link to federal government policy.

Another striking consequence of the current governance structure is that issues of misconduct in areas such as enrolment and research, which involve national government funding, are dealt with by state anti-corruption commissions. Thus, it is possible that the same conduct relating to a national research grant or the allocation of a nationally supported student place might be deemed corrupt in one state and legitimate in another.

These absurdities are not merely harmless anachronisms. One of the problems with state control of universities lies in the appointment of university councils or senates, the equivalent of the board of a typical business corporation or public statutory authority. The council is notionally responsible to the relevant state minister of education for the performance of its legal duties, but in practice, this is a nullity. The accountability mechanisms of a properly functioning board are replaced, in most cases, by a rubber stamp. Similarly, the Chancellor, typically elected by the council, holds a position formally analogous to that of the Chair of a corporate Board, but in practice plays a largely symbolic role.

In the past, it was common for councils to include substantial representation from the university community: students and staff, both academic and administrative. Under the influence of managerialism, the role of such representatives has been greatly diminished. Appointments are largely made from the business sector on the basis of presumed expertise. However, unlike corporate directors, members of university councils have no responsibility to shareholders or even (as in the case of government business enterprises) shareholding ministers.

As a result, except in the event of a crisis, the council is effectively dominated by the Vice-Chancellor, who faces fewer constraints than either the CEO of a publicly-traded corporation or the Chair of a statutory authority.

International models

In considering reforms to Australian university governance, it is important to consider both the UK model, on which its governance is currently based, and alternatives, of which the University of California system seems most worthy of emulation in the Australian context.

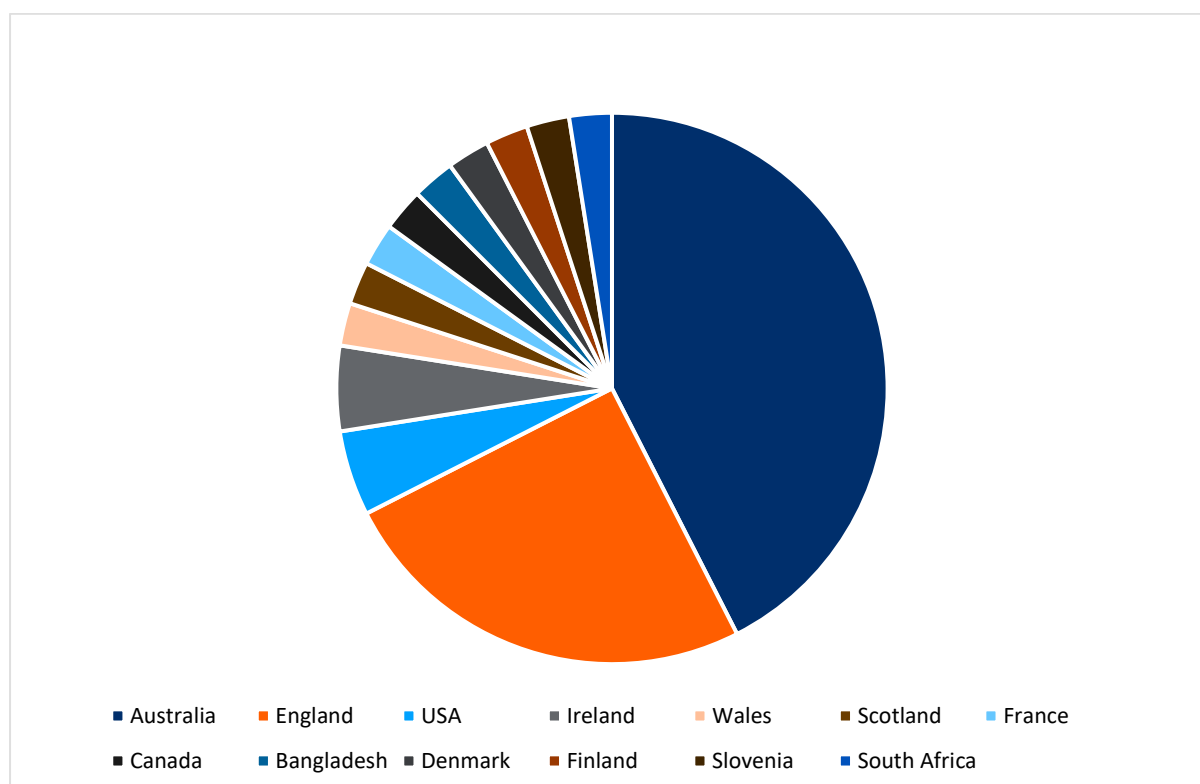
THE UK MODEL

As was noted above, the first Australian Universities were modelled on Oxford and Cambridge. The pattern of following UK models has continued to a striking extent, even as most ties between Australia and the UK have faded away. The establishment of new universities in Australia in the 20th century followed a similar pattern to that in the UK, where a similar binary divide between universities and “polytechnics” prevailed until the 1990s.

Even more strikingly, as of 2020, 12 of 40 Australian Vice-Chancellors (30 per cent) were of British origin. By contrast, only two vice-chancellors were drawn from the vastly larger US university system.

There can scarcely be any field of endeavour in Australia where the UK has such a strong representation. And, inevitably, given the status hierarchies of academia, appointees from the UK are unlikely to be drawn from Oxbridge or similarly prestigious universities.

Figure 2: Australian Vice-Chancellors by Country of Origin, 2022



Source: Quinton and Brabazon (2022)

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, UK universities have experienced many of the same finance and governance problems as those in Australia. In particular, while pay disparities are not as outlandish as those in Australia, the perceived overpayment of Vice-Chancellors has been a major source of discontent.

ELITE US UNIVERSITIES

Much discussion of undergraduate education in the US, and also in Australia, is focused on a small group of elite institutions that educate around 1 per cent of the US population. At the centre of this group is the “Ivy League”.

Technically, this term refers to an inter-university sporting competition, but it is commonly used as a general description of the eight US universities involved, located in the north-eastern United States: Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, and Yale University. To this group may be added high-prestige research universities such as MIT, Stanford, and Caltech and some small “liberal arts” colleges, such as Wellesley and Swarthmore.

Advocates of a deregulated university system, such as (then) Go8 chair and ANU Vice-Chancellor Ian Young (quoted by Knott, 2014), have claimed that Australia should aspire to

emulate and compete with these institutions. Similarly, UNSW VC Fred Hilmer (2014) suggested that modelling Australian universities on the elite US sector could lead to an Australian Caltech.

An examination of publicly available data shows the absurdity of these claims. Table 1 compares data on the members of the Ivy League, the core of the US elite university sector, with the University of Sydney.

Table 1: Key data on Ivy League Universities and the University of Sydney

University	Undergraduate enrolment	Academic Staff	Endowment (\$US billion)
Brown University	7,349	736	\$6.2
Columbia University	6,716	4,370	\$13.6
Cornell University	15,503	2,908	\$10.0
Dartmouth College	4,556	943	\$7.9
Harvard University	7,153	4,671	\$49.5
Princeton University	5,321	1,172	\$34.1
University of Pennsylvania	9,962	4,464	\$21.0
Yale University	6,536	4,140	\$40.7
University of Sydney	39,990	3,735	\$1.0

Source: Wikipedia 2025 and University of Sydney annual report (2023)

The most important feature of this table is that undergraduate enrolments at these institutions, with the limited exception of Cornell, are tiny. Indeed, the entire Ivy League, excluding Cornell, enrolls about the same number of undergraduates as the University of Sydney. Liberal arts colleges are even smaller, with enrolments comparable to those of a large high school in Australia. Including all the US private institutions comparable to the members of the Ivy League would bring total enrolments to around 100,000, in a country with a population twelve times that of Australia.

Adjusted for population, the entire undergraduate enrolment of the set of US elite universities would be around 8,500 in Australia. That is less than the undergraduate enrolment of a typical faculty in an Australian university. For example, the University of Queensland, Business Economics and Law Faculty, where I am employed, has 12,000 undergraduates.

Next, consider staff-student ratios. Australian universities typically enrol about 15 undergraduate students for each (FTE) academic staff member. For leading US universities, this ratio is around 5:1 or lower. These numbers are partially the result of a greater focus on research and post-graduate education, but classes are also much smaller. For example, Harvard (2025) states

The median class size at Harvard is 12. Of the nearly 1,300 courses offered last fall, for example, more than 1,000 of them enrolled 20 or fewer students

By contrast, in Australian universities, a course with enrolments below 50 would be in danger of being scrapped as non-viable.

The final column shows the value of endowments, totalling nearly \$US 200 billion, or about \$US 4 million per student. The income from these endowments allows leading universities to offer discounts on their admission fees, which would otherwise be unaffordable for all but the very rich. These endowments, accumulated over several centuries, are hundreds of times larger than the assets of Australian universities, expressed on a per-student basis

In summary, the suggestion that Australian universities could emulate Harvard and Stanford is about as realistic as suggesting that Australia's armed forces should aspire to equal those of the US or China. The fact that such claims can be made by the leading representatives of the Australian university sector is startling. It casts doubt on the idea that university managers know enough about the industry in which they operate to justify their massive salaries. Indeed, it is only in the salaries paid to Vice-Chancellors that Australia competes on the same playing field as the Ivy League.

THE CALIFORNIA MODEL

The UK model of university governance may be contrasted with the system of state universities in the US, and in particular with the California system. With a population of about 40 million, California is comparable to Australia as a whole. Public universities in the US are typically under the direct control of state governments, which frequently results in political interference, such as the recent attack on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs.

The University of California, however, has a distinct constitutional status as a public trust, protecting it from direct "legislative control and public clamor" (Douglass 2015).

The University of California System is, in terms of governance, a single institution. However, its ten campuses (at Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz) are distinct universities with substantial autonomy in teaching and research.

The University of California (UC) system took its current form with the 1960 Master Plan, which aimed to provide universal access to post-secondary education. The most important single feature of the Master Plan has been the guarantee that the top 12.5 per cent of Californian high school graduates are entitled to a place in one of the flagship UC system schools (classed as research intensive). The remainder of the top third would be able to

enter the California State University system. Those who did not qualify for either of these would be able to attend two-year community colleges (Wikipedia 2025)

At the time, the plan was revolutionary, and even now, its ambition is striking. The flagships offered enough places that students from almost any background, given ability and determination, could get in, and the system produced enough graduates to meet the demand for workers in professional and managerial occupations. Even more striking was the idea that everyone, no matter what their family background or how well they had done at high school, should have a shot at higher education and the social mobility it generated.

Despite severe financial pressures arising from the “tax revolt” of the 1970s, the UC system has remained world-class in research. The commitment to undergraduate education has been weakened as a result of financial stringency, but access remains higher than in most research-intensive systems (Marginson 2017).

Not all aspects of the California model would be appropriate for Australia. Most obviously, the binary system, with a distinction between the University of California and California State University systems, represents a stage that Australia has already passed. But in assessing directions for the future, it is necessary to ask why we are persisting with a UK-derived system of governance that has failed both here and in its country of origin. We should instead be looking at more successful models like California's.

Recommendations

Pressure for an inquiry into university governance has largely arisen from concerns about the high salaries of VCs and management bloat in general. Simultaneously, the interaction between international education, immigration and housing shortages has been highly controversial. These problems should be seen as symptoms of a fundamentally dysfunctional system of governance. The crucial problem is the need for the federal government to take responsibility for the provision of university education and post-secondary education more generally, in the same way as state governments take responsibility for school education.

1. CREATING A NATIONAL SYSTEM OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION MANAGED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

An essential step in establishing good governance of any organisation is to ensure that control over the organisation is aligned with responsibility for its performance and exposure to the consequences of success or failure. This is not the case in Australia. Rather, the national government acts as a funding provider and regulator for a set of effectively independent enterprises, owing their existence to state governments.

Australia needs a national system of universities, established under national legislation. Access to publicly funded student places and national research grants should be contingent on participation in this system.

Under such a system, the national government would be directly responsible for the performance of universities. This contrasts with the present situation in which the government can blame universities for alleged failings such as administrative bloat or excessive reliance on fees from international students, which now accounts for around a quarter of public university revenue (Adhikari et al 2025).

There does not appear to be any constitutional obstacle to such a change. The Australian National University, the University of Canberra and the Royal Military College are all established under national legislation, and there does not appear to be any reason why universities located outside the Australian Capital Territory should not operate under similar legislation.

It seems unlikely that state governments would raise serious objections to such a transfer. Certainly, they would be entirely unwilling to re-assume responsibility for funding

universities. If any university wished to not participate in this system, it could choose to opt-out of both federal regulation and funding.

Ideally, there should be a similar national approach to TAFE, where the national government has become increasingly important as a funding source. However, this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

2. ENDING THE CORPORATE MODEL OF GOVERNANCE AND REFOCUSING ON EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Universities should be governed as public services, like schools, and not as private corporations. This would entail the end of pay scales based on private sector comparators for senior managers. More importantly, it would end the idea that universities should be competing with each other rather than seeking to provide the best education possible for Australians. As with schools, this should not preclude a healthy spirit of emulation in the pursuit of excellence.

A co-operative approach would yield substantial benefits. It would avoid a situation where some programs, seen as profit centres, are offered at nearly all institutions (MBA programs are a notable example) while other courses are unavailable except for students willing to move interstate.

Co-operation would permit substantial reductions in the expensive marketing and branding exercises characteristic of the managerialist university. A trivial example is the regular introduction and equally regular replacement of vapid and interchangeable slogans and logos. An institution aspiring to a lifetime measured in centuries should not need a new slogan every ten years.

3. CREATING A GUARANTEE OF ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Governments have long accepted responsibility for ensuring that all young people in Australia have access to school education. This guarantee once applied only up to the legal age of school-leaving (14 or 15) but has long been extended to the completion of Year 12. The only limitation is that students whose progress is inadequate may be required to repeat a year or receive other specialised support.

When universal school education became the norm, university education was limited to a tiny cultural elite and a handful of professions. In this context, it made no sense to guarantee a right to a university place. But this approach was already obsolete by the 1980s,

when it became apparent that a fee-free system with tightly rationed places could not meet the needs of students or a modern economy.

Forty years later, and despite massive expansion in the university system, there is still no guarantee of access. Admissions are determined by the interaction between government funding and the business plans of universities rather than by the ability to succeed in a university course. Further, there is no guarantee that a local university will offer degree programs in the fields a prospective student wishes to study, effectively locking out those without the means to relocate and live away from home.

Australia needs a national admission system that guarantees access to appropriate post-school education for all. All students whose high school performance is sufficient to indicate that they can complete a university or vocational education course should be guaranteed a Commonwealth-funded place, which they could take at the institution of their choice.

4. PROMOTING CO-OPERATION, NOT COMPETITION

One of the more naïve hopes of neoliberal education reformers was that universities in a market-oriented system would seek to differentiate themselves with respect to course offerings, approaches to teaching and the relative balance of teaching and research. In reality, the neoliberal era has seen the elimination of the diversity that existed in the pre-reform era. Identical incentives and continuous pressure to eliminate any "slack" have produced identical outcomes. This process is not unique to universities - there is large theoretical literature on what is called "neoliberal isomorphism" (Fay and Zavattaro 2016).

A particularly naïve example was the process of fee deregulation undertaken by then Education Minister Brendan Nelson in 2003. Universities were given the freedom to set their own charges within a limited band. The hope was that some would offer low-cost choices while others would go for higher fees and more prestige. Inevitably, universities do not find the option of lower revenue and lower status appealing. Fees are usually set at the maximum allowable level (Norton 2023).

Similarly, then Minister Nelson encouraged diversity in course offerings, apparently expecting universities to offer niche courses in classical literature. He was horrified to discover that the actual outcome was a proliferation of what he called "cappuccino courses" in subjects like surfing (AAP 2003).

While then Minister Nelson's policies were misguided, he was correct in his desire to see subjects like classics preserved in the university system. But the logic of competition runs directly against this. What is needed is for co-operation between universities to ensure that, as far as possible, all students have access to a comprehensive range of courses reasonably close to where they live. That means that universities need to reach agreements (or, as the

last resort, have such agreements imposed nationally) to cover intellectually important subjects even if student numbers are too low to make them profitable.

Equally importantly, universities should cease wasteful competition between themselves through advertising and scholarship offers to attract domestic students. This competition is particularly pernicious since it is directed primarily at high-achieving students who would certainly attend university whether or not they were targeted. Resources devoted to changing the preferences of such students come at the expense of providing better education to young people who might require additional help adjusting to university or who might not attend at all.

A co-operative approach does not preclude healthy rivalry in seeking excellence in teaching, research and service to the community. A desire to do the best possible job is an inherent part of professionalism. By contrast, while managerialist enterprises talk a great deal about excellence, quality and so on, they deliver it only to the extent that it serves the interests of the business.

5. FEDERAL CONTROL OVER INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ADMISSIONS

The expansion of access to undergraduate education for Australian students has been financed largely by international students paying high fees. The expansion of international student education has been highly beneficial for universities, for Australia and for the students themselves. However, it has been problematic in many respects, and there is no data on the net benefit of this system.

First, there have been concerns that the financial incentives to maintain student numbers and “keep customers satisfied” have led to a downgrading of academic standards (Kayrooz, Kinnear and Preston 2001). One feature of this concern is a belief that if the certification provided by Australian university qualifications is seen as less reliable, demand from international students will decline, thereby “killing the goose that lays the golden egg”. So far, at least, this decline has not been apparent.

Indeed, far from declining numbers being a source of concern, a major claim in recent years has been that high student numbers are contributing to housing shortages and that too many students are using international education as a path to permanent migration. These claims are contested, and the incoherent nature of the sector makes it difficult to assess them

These problematic outcomes have arisen from a complex interaction between governments and university managers. Neither university managers nor government ministers have effective control over the number of international students, and each group regularly

blames the other for real or perceived failings. Notably, universities are often blamed for a “short-sighted” reliance on international student income, even though highly constrained government funding is predicated on the assumption that such income will continue.

With a national system, the Commonwealth government would be responsible both for immigration and for university admissions. Thus, it would not be possible to engage in the kind of blame-shifting that has characterised this issue in the past and was on full display during the negotiation of the University Accord.

6. RETURNING TO THE COLLEGIALLY MODEL OF ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE

A central part of the drive to managerialism has been the replacement of collegial governance of academic matters with a system of executive deans and an array of associate deans, with control over course design, assessment and other issues previously decided by academic staff. Faculty meetings, formerly the central locus of decision meetings, are now little more than “all hands” venues for corporate announcements.

The institutional memory of a university resides in its long-serving staff, particularly the academic staff. The replacement of collegial governance by executive managerialism has imposed substantial costs but has not yielded improvements in the academic standards of universities.

To facilitate the managerial system, academic departments have been merged into “Schools” with greater or lesser degrees of coherence. Increasingly, the heads of these schools are also managerial appointees on short-term contracts. This system appears to be unique to Australia, though it has some parallels in the second-tier UK universities from which many Australian university managers are drawn.

During the 1990s, the abolition of discipline-based departments was justified with then-fashionable rhetoric about trans-disciplinarity (CIRET 1994). However, since the academic world as a whole has remained firmly discipline-based, individual academics have continued to regard themselves as members of specific disciplines, teaching and publishing in much the same way as their global peers. In many cases, discipline-based units have re-emerged as “shadow departments” within intellectually incoherent “Schools”.

Although the collegial system has been under pressure globally, it has been more resilient in Europe (Gomitzke, Maassen and de Boer 2017) and, at least until the election of the Trump Administration, in the US. The Australian experiment with executive managerialism should be wound back and, in the medium term, abandoned. Issues of course design and assessment should be managed collegially, by discipline-based departments.

7. CREATING A CENTRAL SYSTEM OF SECTOR-WIDE BARGAINING FOR THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR

One of the main motivations for the recent parliamentary inquiry into university governance was the explosion in the salaries and numbers of top university managers: from 1994 to 2020, the number of senior executives per staff member doubled (Croucher 2023). But the really big problems with wages and conditions are those relating to casualisation, wage theft and inadequate incomes for many workers. These problems have not been addressed adequately by universities operating independently.

The first step in addressing these problems is to replace university-level enterprise bargaining with a single national system. This would reverse the shift away from a national award system that prevailed until the 1980s.

The pretence that Australia's universities are a set of businesses in competition with each other has produced a series of protracted and wasteful enterprise bargains, differing in essentially arbitrary ways across universities. Moreover, the Australian government, which is, by virtue of its central role in funding, the actual employer, is not even at the table.

A national system of bargaining would not solve the problems of wage theft that have plagued Australian universities. But it would provide a better structure through which these issues could be addressed.

It is worth noting that, as in other respects, the Australian system is an outlier. Most other countries, including the UK, have common wage scales. In the US, academics are typically not unionised, but other workers typically bargain at a state-wide level.

Conclusion

The problems of post-school education in Australia are many and challenging. Some of these problems may be attributed to misguided changes in governance, unique to Australia and inspired by managerialist doctrines popular in the 1990s. Others arise from the mismatch between a federally funded system and a set of universities operating under separate state acts of parliament. Addressing these problems would not solve the fundamental problem of providing appropriate post-school education to all young Australians under conditions of financial stringency, this would require additional public spending. But it would reduce the waste associated with a set of bloated organisations envisaging themselves as competitive businesses and rewarding their senior management accordingly.

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