

Aiming Higher:
Universities and
Australia's future

First published in 2025 by Australia Institute Press

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ISBN 978-1-7636621-7-9 (print)

ISBN 978-1-7636621-8-6 (ebook)

Published in Australia and New Zealand by
Australia Institute Press
www.australiainstitute.org.au

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Cataloguing-in-publication data is available from the National Library of Australia

Copyedited by Rod Morrison

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group, an accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001 Environmental Management Systems printer.



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A system under strain

Welcome Week to herald the start of semester at Western Sydney University in 2025 was packed with excited students keen to make friends and begin their academic journey. There was, however, one difference from other years. Students not only queued to join clubs and societies; they also sought handouts of food.

Students around the nation are struggling to make ends meet. For many, university is a time of poverty. Half of our students at Western have food insecurity, with many missing meals. Unsurprisingly, they struggle to finish their studies, with those from poorer backgrounds increasingly quitting or not going to university at all.

Too often, being a university student means going hungry.

We responded by opening a Western Pantry

GEORGE WILLIAMS

on our Kingswood campus in Penrith in mid-2024. It provides free staples like rice, oats and pasta. The demand has proved to be enormous, with 3,400 visits in the second half of 2024. We have since opened another pantry in Parramatta and pop-up pantries on other campuses and will also provide more than 23,000 free dinners and breakfasts in 2025.

As I handed out food to the 100 or more students who came to our Pantry during Welcome Week, I asked them why they were there. The Youth Allowance payment of \$47 a day for students who cannot live at home does not cover the rent, let alone food, transport, medicine and textbooks. They spoke about the Pantry being the difference between staying in university or dropping out.

Sadly, shortages of food and other basics, combined with unreasonably high university fees, have become the reality of higher education today for many students. The system is failing them. As older generations accumulate increasing amounts of wealth through property, tax concessions and other investments, our youth are struggling to get ahead and face the prospect of being locked out of housing.

It was not like this for previous generations. Fresh out of high school in the 1980s, I knew that university was a pathway to opportunity. The system was structured in a way that if I worked hard and took advantage of what higher education provided, I could expect a well-paid job, a great career and the best that life in Australia could offer. Higher education reflected the egalitarian ideal that everyone deserves “a fair go”.

This is still true today for students from well-off backgrounds, but often not for others. For them the social compact is broken. Those who would benefit most from a university education are frequently the least able to afford it. The system does not provide a ladder of opportunity for everyone. Our modern institutions are simply too expensive and too difficult to navigate and, as a result, many people are missing out on the social mobility that higher education offers.

The ladder to a better life is missing more than a few rungs.

The issue of student poverty in Australia rarely enters the public debate when it comes to our universities. The interests of those

whom the system should serve — students and the community — too often take a backseat to public concern over unpaid wages, sexual assaults on campuses, anti-Semitism and freedom of speech, and the perennial issue of executive pay.

As these issues dominate the agenda, it is easy to lose sight of the mission of our universities and the public good they deliver. The debate also obscures the larger role of higher education. Universities are a central part of our civic life as anchor institutions in their local communities and underpin the success of our democracy. Our economic and social progress depends upon their success as generators of knowledge, creativity, invention and social mobility. If you want to change the world for the better, education is the place to start.

But something has gone badly wrong. Anger at universities, with escalating concerns about governance and intense political pressure from all sides, have left universities friendless and alone. And when universities lose, it is not just students who suffer, it is the nation at large.

This is not a recent phenomenon. The well-being of our universities has deteriorated over

decades and has reached a tipping point where the financial sustainability of many institutions is under threat. The plight of the sector mirrors the strains of modern Australia, with some universities under dire financial pressure while others record large profits. The media narrative alternates between job losses and excessive executive pay.

Today, universities find themselves in the distressing position where their very social licence is in question. An increasingly hostile media and uninterested public, combined with a host of inquiries and a growing thicket of regulation that challenge the autonomy and mission of our universities, have created a perfect storm.

Universities have become the political equivalent of the banking sector before the 2017 Hayne Royal Commission. With the way things are going, it is hard to rule out the prospect of a similar inquiry into the nation's universities.

The plight of universities can be seen daily in the media, including in outlets that had been sympathetic. On 28 June 2025 *The Sydney Morning Herald* ran a story under the