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1 June 2026

**To:- The Chair and Standing Committee on Social Issues, NSW Legislative Council
Re:- Submission – Legislative Council Inquiry into New South Wales University Sector**

Dear Dr Kaine and Committee

Thank you for inviting my answers to Supplementary Questions, following my appearance at the Committee hearing on 29 April 2026.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to present.

Answers to the questions are below. Some answers are significantly covered in my submission, so the responses below also look at some finer detail :-

(1) What value or benefit does having alumni representatives on a university governing body create for students?

Please refer especially to Section 5 from page 6 of my Submission. **“Students and alumni have a commonality of interest.”**

- Like students, alumni have a life-time investment in the success of their university.

“Students will become alumni in the twinkling of an eye. – Students are future graduates; graduates are simply former students, most with experience and wisdom to complement student memories. Elected alumni can provide a loyal, expert, composite and accountable contribution, with a strong eye to the reputational standing of their alma mater - which reputation of course necessarily correlates with that of Australia as a whole.”

- Specifically, alumni were **elected and therefore independent** . They are culturally *of* the University, in all its diversities, particularities, and disputatiousness.

Although it is true that election “tickets” did circulate before alumni elections, the reality is that the alumni uniquely come with an independence of interest in the well-being and ambition for the university, un beholden, and uninfluenced by prominent sectorial or personal loyalties or perceived vulnerabilities

- Elected alumni individually and collectively form **a nidus of networking and connections** – between the University Senate, alumni, staff and *students*, and the wider national and international community.

In most alumni elections, very different alumni have come with distinctly diverse backgrounds and networks, which facilitate these overlapping interactions. They usually know the university and its historic values in depth. There is therefore a corresponding diversity applied to questions, “*risk management*”, institutional ambition, and approach. These alumni recognize a wheel re-invention business proposal when they see one.

As for academic “risk management” - By chance, *this afternoon’s news* brings unwelcome news that Sydney University has dropped to position 100 on World University rankings – below a number of other Australian universities. Whatever the reason for this, elected alumni would once have been at the forefront of common concern and demands for investigation and, if relevant, remediation, in the interests of current and past students. As was the case when I first stood for the University Senate, under similar external circumstances.

The governing body of a university must be held accountable for the university’s academic reputation, and ensuring processes are in place to protect it.

Consider a University appointment of an equivalent of The Cambridge Board of Scrutiny or The Harvard Board of Overseers. Each of these entities provides an added level of oversight to ensure procedural and academic integrity. (NB – These are **University**, not government, overseers like TEQSA)

[Reports - Cambridge University Reporter 6756](#)

[Board of Overseers - Harvard University](#)

- Cross-sector networking will help students without pre-formed outward connections to acquire them.

In the transition to adulthood, students look for perspectives and education beyond their chosen “job ready” classroom, to understand life and to make life-long friends and connections. Elected alumni know these values and advantages, and the pragmatic importance of helping students acquire them.

Like many other alumni on the University Senate, I made a deliberate effort to connect with University staff and students, as well as external contacts. As Senate members we were asked to a large number of events and dinners, and I did my best to attend, consistent with my work. By being privy to grassroots concerns while also being part of the wider Australian community, alumni electees formed real bridges between the university, its staff and students, and the community, both in Sydney and, when travelling, abroad .

- Alumni can bring back the wider experience and perspective to the university, and be motivated to advocate for the university in the community and to Parliaments. (For instance, I confess to having once “ghosted” an MP’s House of Representatives speech on higher education – which then became the subject of reporting and a *Weekend Australian* editorial).

All this has an obvious benefit for students, who will have chosen their university because they will rightly expect that a degree from this chosen university will enable them to succeed in life, and that its worth will be well recognized wherever they are in Australia or overseas. (See above concerns re rankings).

- The ability **to articulate focused questions**, born of different alumni backgrounds, was, in my observation, a particular characteristic of alumni electees.

“Left field” or irritating questions from unexpected sources on a governing body can be critical to risk management in complex organizations. Larger governing bodies can facilitate this.

- Elected alumni also know the importance of being accountable.

Perhaps I should mention, hesitantly, that I was recently beyond surprised when The University of Sydney (students’) Union asked if they could name their “People and Culture Room”, which is in one of their buildings (Manning House), after me. (I thought that sort of thing only happened when people died, whereas I am still very much alive and wondering about my next enterprise). When I recovered, I contemplated that perhaps I did do something right while on the University Senate, as I sought to bring my own background from student days meaningfully into the present. I mention this only to illustrate the above arguments about networking, in the context of the question you ask.

(2) Today, only a third of the Senate are elected by members of the University. What problems does this create?

- **In short, diminished accountability and therefore greater risk. Then, the consequent death of a culture of wide consultation – more risk**

Now for the long answer:-

- **First – there is the problem of cultural attenuation.**

Boards and Governing bodies are responsible for “Visions”, “Missions” and “Strategies”. Further, as the Australian institute of Company Directors once told its students, culture and values are set from the top (Boards, in the corporate world) . So if most members of a governing body are not elected, or are transient members of the University, there is a real danger that Strategies will at best be “off-key”, and at worst, short-term and/or missing essential considerations

- **The stand-out problem is accountability.**

If too few members of a university governing body are elected, there is a real risk that the “mission”, priorities, and strategic “vision” of a University may not reflect the proper values of the University as they have evolved over time. Or that a wrong policy will persist uncriticized due to the self-perpetuation of a governing body, whose members choose most of their successors.

If things go off track (eg academic ambition falling, research focus lost, plans to contribute to national or international connections and progress let drop) how will there be the kind of essential “re-set” to put things back on track? A casual read of the introductions to many university annual reports does rather suggest that they could be interchanged without too much noticing.

- There is another insidious problem which is associated with, and I think likely to be a consequence of lack of accountability which accompanies loss of elections, particularly the wholesale wiping out of one constituency (alumni). **And that is lack of transparency and the loss of the once reflexive practice of consultation, Not to mention the loss of too much corporate memory.** I think this is inadvertent rather than deliberate.

Without accountability, the art and ambit of consultation slowly dies.

The dropping of the habit of consultation before the choosing of the Sydney Chancellor is a prime recent example. Another (as I discovered last week) is the recent inadvertent failure to consult alumni regarding nominations for University honorary awards – notwithstanding an earlier Senate’s deliberate (and, as far as I know, unrescinded) decision to include alumni among qualified nominators. A third example is that the publication of non-confidential University Senate agendas and minutes quietly disappeared around the time the elections for Senate were abolished, in 2016..

I emphasize - No individual is responsible for these recent multiple omissions – it is a systemic cultural failure which follows the loss of awareness when a whole electoral constituency (alumni) is discarded, and another (academic staff) is halved. .

There is always a danger that without a guaranteed substantial proportion of members of a governing body otherwise belonging to that university, that a sense of a university’s particular role in Australia’s education ecosystem may be overlooked – particularly in the case of older and more established universities. That said, I must also emphasize say that Sydney University Senate has had truly outstanding contributors in both appointed and elected categories, and with and without a prior background with the University. It is the proportions and constituent categories that matter.

- **Finally – without a majority of elected members, the choice and criteria for Chancellor may reflect the personal backgrounds, qualifications and priorities of a substantially non-representative and small governing body.** See answer to next question re the choosing of a Chancellor

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(3) How would you improve the selection process for Chancellor?

(Please See also Sections 9 and 10 of my Submission)

- **First, I think it very important that the choice of Chancellor should not simply reflect the inevitably restricted perspectives of the individuals, often appointed from a mainly commercial background, who constitute a small unelected governing body of the day.**
- **Hence my foremost proposal - to MANDATE CONSULTATION OF ALL UNIVERSITY MEMBERS (alumni, staff, students) whenever there is a vacancy or expected vacancy in the office of Chancellor. These days, email makes that easy.**

Ask university members to provide detailed written reasoned submissions concerning both criteria and names – as Sydney University did while I was on its Senate.

If every member of the Committee which decides Order of Australia awards can read through every detailed written proposal for the OA, as we are told that they do, then it is surely not beyond the ability of a University committee and governing body to likewise consider significant number of detailed submissions.

My own view is that the primary requirements for a Chancellor must reflect the fact that the Chancellor represents the University and all it stands for to the wider world, and imparts the values of the University to its students. He or she is the University's co-Chief diplomat and advocate, who is intuitively and visibly "of" his or her University. He or she must have a perspective which wraps widely and fondly around his or her own University and indeed the broader university sector. The "qualifications" are therefore intrinsically different from that of Vice-Chancellor, and of the Chair of the governing body's Finance Committee. A commercial or administrative background really should not quasi-automatically be a primary qualification for a Chancellor. Of course the issues and controversies of the day must be fully understood, and meetings chaired appropriately and fairly. Not a difficult ask.

Some surprising choices turn out to be the most outstanding. (HD Black at Sydney University was perhaps one such).

The governing body is ultimately responsible for choosing the Chancellor. A Committee can review the recommendations, and consider other ideas, before recommending a preferred name or names to the governing body – together with all information from the university suggestions. The governing body must make a fully informed decision regarding all candidates:-

- This is because a nominating or search committee must not be the *de facto* deciding body. That is the unique responsibility of the whole governing body – which must therefore have access and personally peruse the "long list". This is essential because the governing body must make a properly informed decision. It would be a travesty if a working committee is effectively given a power of veto over the governing body, by

withholding information about its non-preferred candidates when such an important decision is at stake.

(Remember – Joern Utzon was retrieved from a discarded list of candidates to design our Opera House, after having at first failed to make a committee’s “short list”. Australia owes a lot to the person who enabled his name to be resurrected..)

The question of whether or not there should be a broader *deciding* body would be well worth further parliamentary and university consideration if ideas present, but at the moment an essential reform is the mandatory broad consultation, followed by consideration of the full governing body. Likewise, the question of Chancellor-specific term limits is another issue.

I ATTACH fyi a 2025 advertisement in The Australian Financial Review in relation to the then forthcoming choosing of the Chancellor of Deakin University. I have a problem with it in that it imposes the formulation of a professional “head-hunter” regarding the qualities required of a Chancellor on to the application process. My point is that such a process via a search firm presupposes – certainly in the case of Deakin – that the Chancellor will have a managerial/professional Director/commercial background. Much better to leave the criteria for Chancellor open at the time of nomination, and not deter potential superb, “left-field”, candidates from consideration. As I said in my Submission, the corpus of alumni, staff and students will collectively provide a much more relevant and educated search committee than any professional outfit is likely to match. Still, at least the process at Deakin began *publicly*!

(4) What changes do you believe need to be made to the Senate to make it more accountable and improve its operations?

- **A clear majority must be elected. See above answers. Given the obvious necessity to ensure financial expertise, which may need to be obtained by co-option, this will involve expanding the size of the governing body – to that more common in leading overseas universities.**
- **At least 5/23 governing body members should be elected alumni (at least at Sydney).**
- **Where co-option power exists, look not only for financial expertise, but also professional diplomacy and leading academic insights.**
- **Use the co-option power to balance leading scientific and humanities practitioners. (Until quite recently there were too few scientists on the University of Sydney Senate.)**

- Given the complexity of university operations – which include but extend well beyond financial considerations – consideration should be given to reverting to prior practice of holding more frequent (i.e. monthly) meetings, which extend for longer than what I am told became normal practice when elections were abolished.
- Governing bodies should publish Agendas and Minutes relating to non-confidential matters.
- University Vice-Chancellors should hold periodic “Town Hall” meetings with alumni. Just as some do with staff.
- Universities should hold the equivalent of an Annual General Meeting of alumni, staff and students – held on an evening – and attended by members of the Governing body and other key personnel, and including of course the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor
- “Big or material proposals” should as far as possible be floated and “socialized” before rather than after decisions are made.

I would be very happy to provide further comment should you require it.

I also wish to acknowledge the service of so many former University Senate colleagues and their successors, of whatever provenance.

Yours sincerely

Robin Fitzsimons

Date Correction to my Submission. I was an elected member of The University of Sydney Senate from December 1997 (not 1999) to November 2009. Apologies

...businesses trying to take
...of billions of super funds
...than \$1 million, the aged
...are about much larger
...long term.
...ment. The most
...will pay - and they have as
...million in assets of which
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...est \$9000 a year for
...are.

...costs will also be steep for
...threes, but the entire
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...government argued for a
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...should have made more
...investigations and potential trials were
...finished.

"The RSI is aware of the significant
...strain this matter has placed on veter-
...ans, even those not involved in alleged
...incidents," he said.

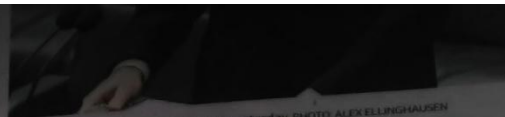
Citing privacy reasons, Mr Marles
...was vague on the exact number who
...had been stripped of their Distin-
...guished Service Cross, but it involves
...fewer than 10 officers.

However, it appears that in a handful
...of cases, Mr Marles overrode former
...Chief of the Defence Force Angus
...Campbell's recommendations that
...more officers be stripped of medals. Mr
...Campbell had sent letters to up to 15
...officers telling them they would lose
...their medals.

The group involved were mid-
...ranking officers at the time, such as
...majors or lieutenant colonels. Most
...have left the military, many disillusioned.
...Only one or two remain, accord-
...ing to one source.

As special forces soldiers, they have
...protected identity status, which means
...they cannot be named publicly.

The decision to remove medals is
...separate to the continuing probe by the
...specially created Office of the Special
...Investigator into the allegations
...uncovered by the Brereton inquiry that
...25 Australian soldiers murdered 39
...Afghan civilians and prisoners. Only



Richard Marles addresses parliament yesterday. PHOTO: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

one person to date has been charged.
...Mr Marles had been weighing up a
...decision over the medals since May last
...year and said he had been closely
...guided by Mr Brereton's findings and
...recommendations that field command-
...ers should pay a price.

However, Mr Brereton's inquiry also
...said that officers further up the chain of
...command, including Mr Campbell,
...should not lose military honours. In
...2011, Mr Campbell had been appointed
...commander of all Australian forces in
...the Middle East, which included
...Afghanistan.

Mr Marles defended his call to allow
...Mr Campbell and other senior com-
...manders to keep their medals, despite
...pressure from veterans advocates that
...they too should have them stripped.

"[Mr Brereton] is the one, more than
...any of those who are out there com-
...menting, who understands best exactly
...what happened, the proximity of vari-

ous commanders to what happened,"
...he said.

Opposition defence spokesman
...Andrew Hastie, who served with the
...Special Air Service Regiment in
...Afghanistan, said senior commanders
...and politicians had shown a lack of
...moral courage and did bear some
...responsibility.

"Those in the chain of command who
...saw the post-mission slide decks with
...the kill counts and pictures of dead indi-
...viduals had an obligation to ask ques-
...tions," he said.

Mr Marles said the findings of Mr
...Brereton - who now heads the National
...Anti-Corruption Commission - would
...always be a "national shame".

He told parliament the government
...had responded to 139 of the Brereton
...inquiry's 143 recommendations, and
...was now closing its response. In July, it
...established a compensation scheme for
...families of the dead Afghans.



our recommendations
...public sector, while

role in the Office,
...he organisation and
...anisation delivering
...public sector entities

opportunities for
...looking to start a
...art of the change.

0900 or email:

Tasmanian
Government

Davidson

CHANCELLOR APPOINTMENT 2026

- Play a strategic role in one of Australia's progressive universities
- Bring your passion for education and a global outlook to governance of the University
- Work with a passionate and diverse Council focused on making a positive difference



Deakin University is well known for making a positive difference in the lives of its students, staff, industry partners and community stakeholders and is committed to providing the best possible career opportunities for its graduates. Deakin is renowned for its innovation and balanced excellence in both education and research that generate ideas and outcomes that transform lives and communities.

At the conclusion of the appointment term of the current Chancellor, Deakin University is seeking to appoint its next Chancellor, to commence from 2026, as it continues to be one of Australia's progressive universities, leading in blending digital capability with its distinctive campus precincts.

The Chancellor leads the University's governing body, the Council, in inspiring the University to high achievement and making the best possible decisions for the sustained success of the University. As the governing authority of the University, the Council, chaired by the Chancellor, plays a critical role in approving the mission, strategic direction, budget, and business plan, as well as reviewing management and performance and monitoring risk, academic activity, and significant commercial initiatives. Responsible for appointing and monitoring the performance of the Vice-Chancellor, the Council also establishes policy consistent with legal requirements and community expectations.

Deakin University invites applications for appointment to the position of Chancellor - an appointment that will commence in January 2026.

To be considered for this significant and high-profile leadership opportunity, you will have demonstrated performance excellence in such positions as a Chair of a Board of Directors and/or Chair or Chief Executive of a similar peak decision making body. With an eminent record as a strategic, long-term thinker, you will have successfully translated a vision and mission into sustainable outcomes. Your deep understanding of effective governance and the demarcation between governance and management will enable you to guide the Council, University executive and staff across the diverse range of education, research and commercial requirements of this \$1.5 Billion institution. As a passionate advocate for the importance of university education and research, your interpersonal skills enable you to deeply engage with the interests and ambitions of our students, staff and industry, community and political partners and stakeholders.

To view the Position Description and candidate requirements for this appointment, please visit the following link: <https://bit.ly/3B0vnWx>

To make an application, please go to www.davidsonwp.com to upload your Resume and Cover Letter. For a confidential discussion, please contact Paul Lefebvre on 0408 036 046 or email: Paul.Lefebvre@davidsonwp.com or Clare McCartin on 0414 595 941 at Davidson Search & Advisory.

Applications close on Sunday 27th October 2024.

www.davidsonwp.com

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