

Question on Notice

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Thrower, I was noting an answer that you provided to one of my colleagues earlier indicating that consultants could often be engaged to deliver an outcome for a university that they were seeking to build a justification for, in effect. I'm always wary of generalisations. Can you provide some concrete examples where you've come across a university hiring a consultant where there's already been a predetermined outcome that the university's seeking, and the consultant's been effectively used as a cover to provide that outcome? If you've got three examples, that'd be really great.

JACK THROWER: I'm able to get back to you on notice. I have seen a fair bit of it in the media but I would be—

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The CHAIR: If I could just jump in, Mr Thrower, I can't remember if it was your Australia Institute submissions or perhaps *The Saturday Paper* investigation I was reading that cited the ANU example of I think it might have been Nous who provided strategic advice to the council, which was then put on council letterhead and described as the council coming up with it. I wondered if that was part of your research, or is that something I'd read elsewhere?

JACK THROWER: That's not part of our research. I have read various reporting from *The Saturday Paper* and things where this sort of behaviour has been assessed but we haven't done investigations into it. I am predominantly making a statement of my impression based on various parts of research. It's difficult to make specific allegations that such a thing did in fact occur without full inquiries into the matters. What I wanted to highlight is my concern based on reporting in the media that such things, based on that reporting, appear to be happening. I can get you specific examples on notice but I don't have them at hand right now.

The CHAIR: That would be great. If you could take that on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: I was going to seek specifics but given that there is clearly none, I am okay.

The CHAIR: I will just correct the record. The witness has said that he will take that on notice and provide examples in due course.

Response

As mentioned in the hearing, proving individual cases of this concern is difficult. This is likely due to the low transparency of high-level decision-making at universities and potential concerns from whistleblowers about professional and legal consequences. However, this type of concern has been reported in the media and in other parliamentary inquiries. We have provided examples below.

In *The Saturday Paper*, Rick Morton¹ wrote about the concern regarding recent scandals at the ANU:

It's the one element of the ANU story that confounds observers. Usually, so the wisdom goes, the VCs want to bring in the consultants so they can shift the blame for a decision or use the external advice as ballast in selling it.

"I get the sense that in a lot of universities the vice-chancellors and the deputy vice-chancellors – they kind of know where the fat is, they know where they need to cut, but it is such a hostile political environment that if they just come out and say it, they will get a whole lot of pushback," the former Nous staffer says.

"There is a veneer of objectivity or independence. If you bring in the external consultants who have got the data, crunch the numbers and have an authoritative

¹ Morton (2025) 'Mind-boggling stupidity': The consultancy that captured universities, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/education/2025/06/14/mind-boggling-stupidity-the-consultancy-that-captured-universities>

report that says, 'Yes, we can cut our humanities by 30 per cent', or HR or whatever it may be, then it strengthens the VC's hand to be able to do it."

...

As one academic familiar with the Nous approach tells The Saturday Paper, the idea that consultants could be brought in to provide cover for executive decision-making is embarrassing.

"That has always been the justification for the exorbitant salaries of the vice-chancellors, that they are essentially CEOs who run these gigantic institutions with thousands of staff and we're paying them \$1 million a year because they have to make the big decisions," he says. "But they're not even doing that."

Related concerns were raised and discussed in the Federal inquiry.² Including the excerpt below:

2.98 A disconnect between the corporate worldview of consultants and the public mission of universities was also observed by Professor Cortese:

The consulting advice provided, and directions suggested, is typically not technical nor neutral. The advice is not framed within the context of higher education as a public good underwritten by principles of collegiality, intellectual endeavour, and academic excellence. Rather, the advice framed within a business-based worldview — that bigger is better, that doing more with less is the way to go, and a fundamental belief in sanctity of the bottom line, however created.[102]

2.99 However, according to Professor Cortese, consultants can provide university management with useful cover for decisions that are likely to be unpopular:

Consultants produce reviews that are often the basis for unpopular or unpleasant decisions in universities. They provide a complete transfer of blame from university management to the consultants and their recommendations, while also facilitating assistance with offensive and defensive manoeuvres as decisions are implemented.[103]

2.100 A similar view was expressed by Dr David Cooper, who stated that the use of external consultants served 'primarily to circumvent the distant and implicitly adversarial relationship between executives and those whose expertise and judgement they could be relying on'.[104]

² Education and Employment Legislation Committee (2025) *Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers – final report*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/UniversityGovernance48/Final_report