



Queensland University of Technology

Response to the Senate Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy

QUT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Senate Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy discussion paper*.

Universities play a central role as cultural institutions, in their three missions of learning and teaching, research and community engagement. They must remain responsive to the needs and expectations of the communities that sustain them and to which they belong. They are simultaneously an important product of and a significant contributor to local, regional and national identity, always engaging with the evolving challenges facing their immediate geographical area, the nation and the wider world.

QUT would like to comment broadly on the role of a university in Australia's nationhood, national identity and democracy across the following domains:

- Aspiration and access to education
- Learning and teaching
- Research
- Public debate

Across these domains, universities have a responsibility to work with their partners, communicate shared findings, and promote the use of and value in evidence-based decision-making at local, state, national and international levels.

Aspiration and access to education

Australia has historically demonstrated a strong commitment to increasing access to education: indeed, this commitment preceded not only nationhood but also European settlement, as long-lived and continuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices attest.

More recently and locally, the swell in support for deep and broadly beneficial initiatives like QUT's Learning Potential Fund has coincided over the last decade with a surge in students across the nation looking to access higher education. Recent remarks by federal Education Minister the Hon Dan Tehan MP show that Government recognises that the legitimate demand for a university education will only continue to increase, and with it the dependency of the Australian economy on a highly educated workforce.

Despite this record of achievement, some parts of Australia still manifest stubbornly low rates of higher education participation, progression and attainment. Ancillary factors such as transport access, household income, English language proficiency and health outcomes – while certainly significant – do not wholly explain the lag. Experienced socially connected commentators such as school principals, social workers and career advisers tell us that when those variables are controlled for, the remaining disparity is explained by a want of aspiration: prospective students simply do not see the value of university education. Indeed, they may not even ask themselves the question of its worth, excluding the prospect of higher education as simply beyond their cultural or social range.

It is Australian universities' responsibility to foster that aspiration and to create opportunities for its fulfilment. As an institution that prides itself on being a socially responsive, technology-focused *university for the real world*, this is of utmost importance to QUT. A core element of our forthcoming revised strategic plan, *Blueprint 6*, is our drive to build Aspiration and Inclusion in Queensland. We are already working to build upon existing success in increasing access to education in

Queensland's forgotten pockets, attracting new and different cohorts, and showing those who don't have higher education on their radar that university is both a possibility and an opportunity.

The inclusion of people from all walks in the effort to enhance the national common weal cannot be over-emphasised. Just as the parliament needs to be open to everyone for the nation to reach its fullest potential, so too does the university (and the media, the judiciary, the military and so on).

By enabling people from every strata of society – every region and class, every origin and social group – to avail themselves of higher education (should they have the interest, talent and ambition) universities have a central contribution to make in the creation of a body politic that is lively, engaged, informed, self-aware, critical*, sceptical*, rigorous and articulate.

Learning and teaching

Universities should endeavour to prepare their students, the next generation of workers, for the opportunities, challenges and transitions they may encounter as they enter the workforce. Education is an holistic process. Mastery of discipline-specific skills are crucial, as are the transferable human skills (such as collaboration, emotional intelligence and communication) and the ability to work across disciplines. An engineer's mathematical and planning abilities are funnelled through their ability to meet project specifications; a musician's livelihood requires the ability to manage and market their talents; and health professionals communicate daily with others across all levels of the spectrum of medical literacy. We are all interdisciplinary, every day, but we are unequally trained in these vital ancillary skills.

Therefore, universities have a duty to develop curricula that prepares students for the workforce of the real world on three levels. Firstly, graduates must be prepared to contribute to the workforce of today, to meet the expressed needs of employers. Secondly, they must be equipped to evolve their skillsets in response to changing requirements, some of which we cannot even yet foresee – for this they need to acquire the deep skills of continuous learning.

Thirdly, universities have a role to play in shaping the workforce's collective identity. More than merely plugging a hole in the ship's hull, they must look forward to what the ship *should* look like, tackling emerging challenges and improving professional practice through the training of continually better-equipped new professionals.

Research

Despite years of public encouragement and political interest, Australian innovation and research is not in as strong a position as we are entitled to expect. Limited funding, political interference in research grant allocation and top-down direction of effort has made it hard to retain home-grown talent in favour of more open and well-resourced research powerhouses like the USA, Norway, Germany and China. Changes in visa programs have hampered Australia's ability to attract international academic talent.

This is partly attributable to a drive towards favouring applied research over discovery research. The latter is often erroneously understood to involve 'failed research' when it does not produce either a positive result or immediately actionable findings. During the 1990s, a 'failed' CSIRO experiment to detect atomic particle-sized exploding mini black holes led to an unsuccessful CRC funding bid on the application of radioastronomy expertise to address the signal handling challenges of short-range wireless communications. This work ultimately led to the later creation of Wi-Fi. We developed that work regardless of his treatment, but how many other promising avenues arising from 'failed' experiments have been left dormant? Exploratory blue-sky discovery research is out of fashion, but is the feedstock for all application.

* We use these terms in their technical senses – as integral to rigorous intellectual processes of scrutiny – without any shade of negativity or contrariness, as their common meanings can sometimes convey.

QUT advocates for a research funding system in which government, universities, industry and publicly funded research agencies coexist and are funded properly for their respective roles, yet find benefit in working collaboratively and generatively, within the most productive open-source template for adaptive innovation in the world of today and tomorrow.

Australian policymakers and research administrators have in the past come together to develop such a system. *Backing Australia's Ability* was an innovation plan aimed at stemming the national brain drain and recapturing our place amongst the world's great innovators and inventors. For over a decade and with bipartisan support by successive Australian governments, *Backing Australia's Ability* provided a coherent, overarching structure to nurture a research ecosystem in which each element could thrive in collaboration with the others. Examples of breakthrough innovation in this period – such as the cervical cancer vaccine – must be read in the context of this ecosystem approach, which underpinned a research model that is at once engaged yet open, problem-oriented yet curiosity-driven.

Public debate

Universities must always be places of open debate, where evidence is the only authority and where all voices have a right be heard, as long as they adhere to the principles of respect, submission to critique, openness to new thinking, and the production of honest and rigorous evidence. The assertion of these freedoms on the part of one person or group cannot logically come at the expense of their possession by another. Universities themselves have long adhered to these principles and should ensure that they continue to observe them in practice for their own benefit. Moreover, when they realise these standards of open debate, universities are excellent training grounds that help foster a culture of respectful debate in other institutions (such as politics and the media) and in the broader society.