SUBMISSION ON
ALUMNI PARTICIPATION IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE
TO
THE REVIEW OF NATIONAL GOVERNANCE PROTOCOLS

Bond University’s Chancellor, Trevor Rowe, reports (HES “Model of a Modern Chancellor”, 23 May 2007) that at his university, “like a proper corporation…the Board is accountable to its shareholders”. This company business model makes sense for Bond, a private university. Its company’s shareholders have a vested interest in seeing their venture prosper.

However for publicly-funded Australian universities, the group of individuals holding the greatest stake in success or failure is not shareholders, but alumni. Alumni are permanent members of their university, they hold degrees which have cost them “sweat equity” as well as fees, and are equally keen to see an increase in value. They are likely to be parents of future students. These factors explain why governments and Vice-Chancellors alike expect so much from alumni fund-raising.

Accountability to alumni should thus hold a central place in governance reform. International models teach the important nexus between being responsible for your university and supporting it (with time, money, connections etc). Stanford University regularly makes a world-wide call for nominations from its alumni for 8 of its 35-member Board of Trustees; and in February this year the election of Harvard’s 28th (and first woman) President required, as is usual, consent from Harvard Corporation’s all-alumni Board of Overseers. A recent article in The Wall Street Journal (“Revolt of the Alumni and Other Good News”, 16-17 June 2007) recounts a number of highly reputable US colleges which, having lost their way financially or otherwise, are experiencing intense alumni back-lash and pressure for reform. Indeed the article cites Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, where an over-powerful administration attempted to curb this alumni voice for reform by changing alumni electoral procedures, only to meet with dismal failure:

“The Dartmouth administration responded last fall by proposing a new set of trustee election rules which would have made outsider candidacies more difficult. The measure needed two-thirds of voting alumni to pass but failed to get even a majority. The year ended with the election of a fourth [alumni] reformist.”

Commitment like this cannot be purchased or conferred, for example by obligation to an appointing Minister. It derives from the inbuilt motivation alumni posses to see “their own” university improve its standards and reputation.

I believe it is important that the present round of university governance reform preserves and strengthens the participation of alumni in providing, selecting, and holding accountable, suitably qualified graduates to serve on Australian universities’ governing
bodies. Responsible Ministers should take comfort in the natural support for good governance and sound management which is automatically provided by alumni choosing to serve on “their” university Council.

It is disturbing to note that the Australian National University, following its 2004 federal-reform legislation, now has a governing Council which has abolished all mandatory alumni participation. Other universities (such as University of Technology Sydney) have abolished elections from and by alumni – presumably on such short-sighted grounds as inconvenience and cost, since despite its youth, UTS already has many distinguished and committed graduates. But costs of direct elections are set to fall, as better methods of electronic voting become acceptable (as in company AGM votes). And all universities are moving, if slowly, to e-communications with their far-flung alumni members. One real benefit of the internet is that, for the first time since the mediaeval era, the alumni diaspora can in fact continue to participate in “their” university. It is also important to note that, as an electorate, alumni are not and should not be commingled with staff and student members: existing Acts and By-Laws firmly separate them and should continue to do so.

Alumni are by definition external not internal members of a University Council, but have a more substantial personal investment in the reputation and welfare of their University than non-alumni externals. The value of their degrees is reflected in their lives and their careers. They have a deep knowledge of the institution – both strengths and weaknesses – from personal experience as former students. They form a natural bridge between the “insider” concerns of staff and students and the “outsider” views of general community and industry groups.

The present climate of higher education funding requires Australian universities to diversify their funding sources beyond State and Federal Governments and thus to engage far more deeply than before with their alumni. Alumni support is invaluable for any University in terms of door-opening for industry links, support for student mentoring and other needs, and funding for new academic developments. However, both North America and increasingly UK alumni and development programs have shown there is a strong nexus between alumni responsibility for their institution and being prepared to support it in practical and financial terms.

If alumni are increasingly being looked to for assistance, it does not seem helpful to reduce alumni participation just when universities should be encouraged to make more of it.

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14 July 2007