

Universities need an advocate, director warns

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The Australian Catholic University supports the creation of a new funding body.
Credit: ACU International

Australia's peak body for higher education, Universities Australia, has been debating the relationship universities have with government.

Last week, [a proposal](#) to introduce a "buffer" body to act between government and universities was not endorsed at a Universities Australia plenary, despite strong support from both the University of Melbourne and the Australian Catholic University.

But such a body does exist in the UK, where the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) allocates funding to universities and assesses [research excellence](#).

David Sweeney is Director of Research, Innovation, and Skills at HEFCE, and is visiting Australia this week.

In an interview for The Conversation, he discussed how HEFCE acts as an advocate for the sector, as well as major changes facing higher education such as online learning and the [open access](#) movement.

How does HEFCE act as a buffer between universities and government?

HEFCE is not a buffer body, we are a brokering body, which has a number of functions. We are a funding body, we are also developing a role as a regulatory body, and we spend a lot of time being an advocate for the sector to government. The government respects our arms-length nature, reporting to our board within a statutory framework which constrains the government in the level of detailed advice and direction which they can offer to us. We spend a lot of time exploring with universities, as autonomous independent bodies, how they may be aligned appropriately with government intentions. We can give a more sympathetic and informed explanation than would be possible from [civil servants](#).

We also are capable of offering a degree of challenge that is more difficult for civil servants who are working closely with government. This is a time of civil service reform, a challenging time for civil servants and, although we too have to accept reductions in our administration budget, it is easier for us to take a strategic view about our policy teams and about the way they present material, possibly

unpalatable, to ministers.

How have the politics of austerity affected university funding in the UK?

The times of austerity for universities shouldn't be overstated. There's been a 10-12% cut in public funding over the past four years. Much of that public funding will be recovered if prospective students continue to elect to go to university because the new regime where the government pays the fees upfront gives slightly more public funding to universities.

Our universities in any event have been successful in increasing their private funding. So during a tough period, universities have restructured and cut their cost base significantly. Mostly they've cut their cost base and mostly they've maintained their income, so they've used also austerity as a time for increased efficiency.

What is the best way for universities to share their research with the public?

Research that no one knows about is not going to have any impact, nor is it going to stimulate the worldwide scholarly discourse which is at the core of the academy. Publication is an essential feature of taking research forward to a societal contribution and that's why we're so enthusiastic about traditional research outputs being freely and openly available.

We think that the current view of the world plays too much to a linear model where universities develop new knowledge, they give it, or indeed sometimes sell it, to others who take it forward and develop societal contribution.

We don't think that's the way it works, we think research directions are best informed by societal need. We think the capacity of business and others to make the most of university research, this so-called "absorptive capacity", is stimulated by a high level of engagement between academics and universities and those who are going to use research.

How will the rise of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) affect the higher education sector?

It's too early to tell in my view. We've had a succession of different initiatives where technology influences the learning process, and it was suggested on many of these occasions that technology would significantly interrupt the business model of universities. On the whole that hasn't happened. [Higher education](#) remains a sector which has not been transformed by new technology.

Now that's not to say it won't happen, but I think it does reveal that you've got to get it right in order to make a difference. We've learned so far that for many people going to university, it is about the personal interaction with staff and with other students, as well as engagement with technology. MOOCs offer something new and I think they've got to be assessed, particularly in usability terms, before we can determine if they might significantly disturb the business model.

We've got to face up to these challenges. If it's a better way of learning, if it's what students choose to do, then universities have got to respond to that. Some traditional media businesses took some time to respond to technological changes, and perhaps now regret that.

Those with a closed mind to new technology haven't learned the lessons of history. But those who assume that every new technology will transform an old-fashioned business model are hopelessly optimistic.

This will proceed in an incremental way and then hopefully we will learn that there are better ways of doing things.

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