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Only Universities Think The World Hasn't Changed

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John Dewar, the vice-chancellor of La Trobe University in Victoria, is one of the country's most perceptive vice-chancellors.

As his university faces the potential loss of hundreds of jobs, at a staff meeting last week he was reported to have said: “[The federal Coalition government] thinks it is our fault we are reliant on international student revenue. They think we are naive about foreign interference, particularly from China; and think we don't take issues of freedom of speech or academic seriously enough.”

That's absolutely true. That's exactly what the Coalition government thinks of Australia's universities. And the reason that's what the Coalition thinks is because it's largely true.

[Universities have a point when they complain that despite the sector losing 17,000 jobs last year](#), equivalent to 13 per cent of its pre-pandemic workforce, the Morrison government's JobKeeper program was not made available to public universities. But what universities don't recognise is that many of their problems they've brought upon themselves, nor do they acknowledge the existence of more than \$10 billion of cash reserves accumulated during the boom years of overseas students.

For years universities were warned about the financial and academic consequences of their growing reliance on international students.

In 2015, after a revolt among its staff, the University of Western Australia cancelled a \$4 million contract with the federal government to host a policy centre headed by Bjorn Lomborg. [The staff objected to Lomborg's views on climate change.](#)

(Even if Lomborg had somehow come to an Australian university, he wouldn't have lasted long. A few days ago he published research showing that the land area of Australia affected by bushfires in the 2019-20 season was close to the smallest area in any year since 1900.)

In 2018, after staff protests, the Australian National University refused a grant from the [Ramsay Foundation to establish a Centre for Western Civilisation](#). At the University of Sydney, students and staff protested outside a university senate meeting chanting “USYD is not for sale”. There were no such protests at any of the 13 universities with Chinese government-funded Confucius Institutes.



When individuals dare to disturb the ideological consensus of Australia's universities, if they're staff they're sacked like Peter Ridd at James Cook University (whose claim for wrongful termination [will be heard by the High Court](#) later this year), and if they're students they're suspended, like [Drew Pavlou at the University of Queensland](#).

If there are not more cases such as those of Ridd and Pavlou, it's only because staff and students have become adept at self-censorship. In 2019 a survey of 500 domestic Australian university students found 31 per cent had been made to feel uncomfortable by a university teacher for expressing their opinion, and 59 per cent believed they had been prevented from voicing an opinion by other students.

At the National Press Club this week, Deborah Terry, vice-chancellor of the University of Queensland and chairwoman of the universities' lobby group, [Universities Australia](#), said universities "are places where the ideals of freedom of thought and speech are put into practice". Unfortunately that rhetoric doesn't match today's reality.

Since the 1950s, when Robert Menzies first introduced taxpayer funding of tertiary places, Australia's universities have got from Coalition and Labor governments basically everything they've asked for. There are even laws to prevent anyone attempting to set up a competing institution from calling it a "university".

In their current form, Australia's universities are a legacy industry maintained by taxpayer subsidies and government regulations enshrining their monopoly power. Given the environment in which they operate, it's no surprise universities are monolithic and homogenous. As much as the government might urge universities to commercialise their research, it's easier for the vice-chancellors to simply lobby the government for money.

Every industry in Australia – except, it seems, universities – has realised in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic that it must change how it operates. The world has changed.

The rivers of gold to universities from taxpayers and overseas students will eventually dry up. If universities are going to continue to exist, and if they are going to make a contribution to Australia's economic and social recovery, they will have to stop thinking that more government funding is the first and only solution to their problems.

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