

Beggars in Surplus: Australia's University Gangsters

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, August 31, 2022

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Justice](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the “Translate Website” drop down menu on the top banner of our home page (Desktop version).

To receive Global Research's Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

With the election of a new government in Australia in May, the begging bowls were being readied by administrators in the university sector. Bloated, ungainly, ruthless and uneven in quality, the country's universities, for the most part, had inadvertently made their case for more public funding harder. Initially ravaged by poor investment decisions, notably in the Chinese market, COVID-19 had threatened to wipe the balance sheets of a good number of Australia's academic institutions. Despite initial shocks, the storm has been, apart from a few institutions, weathered.

The University of Sydney [registered](#) a A\$1.04 billion operating surplus between 2020 and 2021, with an underlying surplus of A\$454 million. The University of New South Wales (UNSW) [reported](#) a A\$306 million surplus in 2021, a considerable improvement from its A\$19 million loss in 2020. The University of Technology Sydney [recorded](#) revenue amounting to A\$109 million, shading their \$50 million loss from 2020 into oblivion.

Such surpluses would surely suggest the viability of pay rises for staff, an important point in pay negotiations with stingy university managements. “There's no excuse for university management to be hoarding money in such proportions,” [reasons](#) the National Tertiary Education Union branch president Nick Riemer. “People at the university are crying out for much-needed reforms. This shows they are affordable.”

NTEU New South Wales Secretary Damien Cahill has also [added](#) his view that a number of universities, notably University of Sydney, “can afford a fair pay rise for staff and to fix the problem of widespread job insecurity.”

The response from the non-teaching, non-research blotter jotters was characteristic. Such ballooning amounts were seen as unusual, one-off cases, arrows out of the blue. Around the corner, revenue stripping disasters await. The pot of gold needed protection, not distribution.

University of Sydney's Vice Chancellor Mark Scott led the pack with that ill-worn argument.

“While this is a strong result, it is also a one-off result,” he [claimed](#) in a statement. “We are not immune from the continuing uncertain future of international higher education and the growing cost pressures currently affecting the global and Australian economies.”

The University’s own [annual report](#) notes how the surplus came about “mainly due to increases in overseas student enrolments, strong investment performance and non-recurring items including the Commonwealth Government’s A\$95.1 million Research Support Program contribution and the net gains from the disposal of property assets.”

The picture is one of corporate brands raking in cash rather than educators providing a public service. Some 38 of Australia’s universities, for instance, drew revenue from [selling their shareholdings](#) in IDP Education, considered one of the world’s largest international education companies. Prior to the sale, Australian universities [held](#) a 40% stake in IDP Education, retained via Education Australia.

While operating surpluses have been registered aplenty, job losses have been unremitting. Thousands of staff have been given the big heave-ho and sod off treatment even as managers have continued feathering their nests. (All in all, 3,237 fewer permanent and fixed-term contract staff positions were noted in the latest federal government figures.)

The University of NSW [topped](#) the league tables in that regard, with 726 fewer full-time equivalent positions in 2021 than the previous year. The University of Sydney [shed](#) 223 staff despite recording its best surplus in 172 years. The measure served to reduce employee-related expenses by A\$60 million.

To these job losses can be added those suffered by the invaluable, long suffering casual workforce. In a shameful state of affairs, this precarious body of workers, with minimal labour protections and economic security, constitute the vast bulk of those delivering courses. Prior to the pandemic, the [number](#) of casual employees working in Australia’s universities is estimated to have been in the order of 100,000. Losses of 4,258 full-time equivalents in 2020 were [registered](#), but other higher assessments abound.

Before this spectacle of inequity basks that species of lamentable administrator known as the Vice Chancellor. The Australian variants of this office have persistently proven to be untrustworthy and unworthy. For years, their obscene pay packages, their decisions to reduce able staff while still maintaining their own inflated salaries and the tribunate that surrounds them, deserved an anti-corruption inquiry.

The scope of such an inquiry would have to be oceanic and vast, from teasing out the grounds for ludicrous investment choices to rules stifling free speech and academic freedoms. Along the way, the habitual resort to non-disclosure agreements, the use of codes of conduct as silencing bludgeons, and the almost total absence of solid anti-whistleblower provisions, could be looked at.

Instead of being interrogated by appropriate QCs and chased up with a sharp summons, these managers only grow in number, the mold of administrative disaster, undermining academic health at every turn and creating the next absurd brand they call a “university”. With each semester, new positions are created with names disturbingly reminiscent of industrial cleaning products: DVCs, PVCs, Deputy PVCs and what not. These fatuous appointments are subsidised, in turn, by the labours of ailing, overworked staff, contemplating ruination, dejection, and suicide.

The education system has been in sharp decline in inverse proportion to the financial returns being hailed. Throwing public money at these beggars in surplus, an otherwise sensible proposition that could shield the sector from the ravages of impudent investment decisions, looks less appealing on closer inspection. Without deep, remorselessly brave reform, one that directly decapitates the officialdom of university management, good money will be thrown after ill-gotten gains.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share buttons above or below. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter and subscribe to our Telegram Channel. Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Featured image is from nea.org

The original source of this article is Asia-Pacific Research
Copyright © [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#), Asia-Pacific Research, 2022

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **[Dr. Binoy
Kampmark](#)**

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). Asia-Pacific Research will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. Asia-Pacific Research grants permission to cross-post Asia-Pacific Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Asia-Pacific Research article. For publication of Asia-Pacific Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com

www.asia-pacificresearch.com contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com