

Neoliberalism personified: the Expert Assessment Panel

The Expert Assessment Panel represents everything that's wrong with the higher education sector, and everything that's wrong with the approach of our union's national leadership. The Panel was at the centre of the leadership's late, unlamented National Framework but, with a slightly altered name, is still an element in wage and condition cutting deals national officials are trying to impose at some universities.

This panel of five have the job of classifying universities into categories, which determine the degree of austerity that management is allowed to impose on us. It's this body which has to satisfy itself that management has cut non staff expenses, for instance by trimming senior executive salaries and capital works, and that some jobs will be saved, before giving the green light for management to cut our wages and trash our consultation clauses.

Of course, members of the Panel have no actual powers to *enforce* anything. More fundamentally, the whole setup is premised on the idea that voting to cut the pay of our workmates, rather than organising and fighting for federal funding, is a way out of the crisis, when even VCs admit that the crisis in funding won't be resolved by staff sacrificing pay and conditions.

The problem with the whole approach is apparent in the make-up of the five member Expert Assessment Panel, who perfectly embody a vision of the modern, neoliberal, corporate university. They are part of the problem, not the solution – as is the entire approach being advocated by our union's national leadership.

1. Chair: Don Russell

Don was Paul Keating's chief adviser from 1985 to 1993. Those old enough to remember, or with a bit of knowledge of the history, will be aware of the achievements of the Labor government when Keating was Treasurer:

- Abolishing free education for domestic students, first with the 1987 administration charge, and then from 1989 with the introduction of the HECS, establishing "user pays" in higher education.
- Reducing funding per student in higher education, putting pressure on university administrations to make savings from staff costs and open up additional revenue streams.
- Introducing full fees for overseas students.

Outside higher education, this period of neoliberal Labor saw:

- The start of privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank and Qantas, and the opening up of Telstra to competition.
- The breakup of the system of Awards into Enterprise Bargaining, allowing a "race to the bottom" in which employers compete with each other by reducing wages and undermining conditions.

In other words, Don Russell played a crucial role in laying the foundations for the current, market-driven, neoliberal funding model for universities. Since then he's spent time with wealth management firms and as a top public servant: there's no evidence his approach has changed.

2. Employer nominee: Annabelle Duncan

Annabelle is the former Vice Chancellor of the University of New England.

Management bullying is a fact of life in the neoliberal workplace, and was especially pronounced during Duncan's term as VC. A union [survey](#) in 2016 showed 60% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I personally have experienced or witnessed repeated, unreasonable behaviour at this institution in the past three years." Nearly half had problems managing the level of stress, while a third agreed that "the demands of my job do not allow me to exercise all of my workplace entitlements (eg taking sick leave when sick)".

Nothing had improved by 2019 when Duncan left UNE, with the university's annual report [noting](#) that "The 2019 Voice Survey indicated significant issues with staff morale and confidence."

Staff at UNE [voted](#) "no confidence" in Duncan in August 2017, over a major restructure. Her administration is best known for initiating a major dispute over [workloads](#), described by the local branch of the NTEU as "a radical gutting of the current provisions for regulating academic workloads". Her successor pushed the deal through, over much local opposition, with the [assistance](#) of the NTEU's NSW Division.

3. Employer nominee: Steve Somogyi

Steve was at various times between 2006 and 2016 RMIT's Vice President (Resources), Deputy Chair of Higher Ed Services, and Chief Operating Officer. In that time, he oversaw numerous attacks on staff. This was the period, for example, in which a range of important services including cleaning, security and most of IT were outsourced. Somogyi infamously tried to force staff to accept a ["zero percent" pay increase](#) during bargaining in 2013, even though the university had posted a \$53 million profit in the preceding year.

In 2012 Somogyi oversaw an [attempt](#) to bring in a "Behavioural Capabilities Framework" (BCF) for RMIT employees, stating that staff must "promote the positive rather than the negative" and display passion for the job. Staff would be required to achieve "external benchmarks of performance excellence".

The union denounced that Framework, explaining: "Some of it is nonsensical. Some of it is impossible." When workers [objected](#) and refused to sign the code, RMIT took the union to Fair Work for unprotected industrial action. Fairwork found in favour of management but workers continued the campaign and beat the BCF on the ground anyway.

4. Union nominee: Jamie Doughney

Faced with a chair who has a history as neoliberal pioneer and international financier, and employee nominees with track records of vicious attacks on workers, you'd think the union might put up as its nominees people with an unquestionable track record as fighters for workers and our entitlements.

Instead, the union has nominated Jamie Doughney and Gabe Gooding. The word 'nominated' is important, because, as members of the Panel, these people are explicitly **not** responsible to the union.

Jamie Doughney spoke at the NTEU's Future of the Sector conference in September 2018, described as "a former NTEU Victorian President and National Executive member... In his last six years, he had a number of strategic management roles, including roles in the 2017 restructuring of Victoria University."

The management team that Doughney was part of engaged in a series of "spill and fill" restructures between 2012 and 2018, where many HEW7 roles were replaced by HEW5s, and academic B and C staff were replaced by teaching focused staff on lower wages and much higher teaching contact hours.

Ahead of the last bargaining round, the entire NTEU VU Branch Executive were [targeted](#) for redundancy. The bargaining round dragged on at VU, with management pushing for major concessions via a non union ballot. Jamie Doughney was part of the management team at VU during this entire time. Here is an NTEU leaflet from September 2018 explaining these severe attacks:

Bargaining to protect and improve our pay and conditions.

NTEU National Tertiary Education Union

September 2018

Compare the Pair
ATS staff get a much better deal
under the NTEU's EBA.

Vote NO
 to VU's proposed "Agreement"
 NTEU National Tertiary Education Union

Proposed NTEU EBA	Management proposed EBA
Unified Scale, all ATS staff converted to ATR staff	Yes
Transition provisions carried over from current EBA to allow incremental progression for former ATS staff from Level A to B2. Higher duties allowance also for coordination	No transition provisions. Former ATS seeking progression from Level A to B2 will have to apply through the University promotion process.
336 Teaching contact hours	396 Teaching contact hours
Legally enforceable workload allocation model	Not legally enforceable and many aspects can be changed at the whim of management
Automatic research workload allocation based on transparent measures of research output.*	Research allocation based on discretionary decisions and many discipline areas excluded from receiving a research allocation
Allocation for unit and course coordination*	No allocation
Allocation for Marking*	No allocation for marking
Allocation for postgraduate supervision*	No allocation
Allocation for new unit and course development*	No allocation

*As per the current College Academic Workload Frameworks and EBA

VOTE NO AND GET A BETTER DEAL

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NTEU VU branch President Paul Adams was made redundant at this time. When we learned that Jamie Doughney was one of the NTEU's nominees for the National Expert Panel (now renamed the Expert Assessment Panel), we asked Paul for his thoughts. This is Paul's response:

I was really surprised when I heard that Jamie Doughney had been nominated as the Union representative on the National Expert Panel and thought initially it was some kind of mistake. Most

staff at VU associate Jamie Doughney with the ruthless push to increase workloads, reduce numbers of professional staff and the change processes at VU which have led to a significant number of retrenchments.

Jamie switched from being a Union representative in 2012 to head Enterprise Bargaining for the management at VU in bargaining after not getting the job of Deputy Vice Chancellor at VU which he had applied for, and ceased working with the local Union branch from this point. Jamie then went on to work as management's representative in a range of cost cutting roles aimed at reducing members conditions. He has advocated for reductions in numbers of professional staff despite intense anger from professional staff locally about this and at the recent NTEU Future of the Sector in 2018 argued for more rationalisation of professional staff that would result in job losses.

He has also aggressively headed the push at VU to massively push up academic workloads during post Enterprise Bargaining and has been instrumental in supporting aggressive change plans which resulted in many hundreds of retrenchments at VU by providing the economic and workforce rationales for these changes. The substance of Jamie's figures and budgetary calculations have very often been significantly questioned by the local branch and also the National Office of the Union and any financial work that he does has always been heavily biased in favour of management.

Throughout this period Jamie has shown little sympathy for the many staff at VU and the local VU branch committee members who have been sacked... He has shown a complete contempt for the local branch of the union and staff at meetings.

That he has now been embraced as a union representative again is a real slap in the face for every Union member at VU and is disgraceful.

5. Union nominee: Gabe Gooding

is the National Assistant Secretary of the NTEU, a member of the National Executive which negotiated the awful, concessionary "National Jobs Protection Framework". Before being elected to her current post, Gooding was NTEU WA State Secretary, and played a significant role in the last bargaining round at Murdoch University, which resulted in a serious defeat on key conditions.

Management at Murdoch is extremely aggressive and litigious. The university made history in 2017, terminating the long standing enterprise agreement covering the wages and working conditions of 3,500 staff. This is a very difficult set of circumstances for any unionist. However the response to this vicious attack was far short of what was required, at both branch and divisional level.

While a loyal core of union members took industrial action a couple of times, there was no effort made to equip these members with the skills and backup needed to organise their way across the university (as has happened over the past couple of weeks at Melbourne Uni). There were no stalls, no leafleting, and no right of entry visits.

The result of this passive leadership strategy was both awful and predictable. Murdoch NTEU Branch Committee member Nick Everett [pointed out](#) that the agreement:

- Cut wages in *real* terms, through a 5.5% pay rise over the life of the four year agreement
- Further weakened conversion rights from fixed-term to continuing employment, with any application now subject to refusal on "reasonable business grounds".

- Weakened the previously very strong protections for academic staff threatened with the sack for misconduct.
- Reduced redundancy entitlements for new professional staff by 20 weeks in total, and scrapped a 26 week redeployment period.
- Gutted already weak controls on academic workloads, with all teaching staff now subject to being directed to teach for up to 80 per cent of workload (a measure implemented by Murdoch management earlier this year).
- Radically diminished rights to consultation about changes in university policy.
- Ended a requirement that the university “will provide” casual staff with access to a workstation and email.
- Eliminated “reasonable time” for union reps to consult with workers.

Union members at the meeting which approved this deal were not provided with copies of the agreement – a familiar tactic on many campuses during the current controversy.

To compound all this, the NTEU press release marking acceptance of the deal at Murdoch was headlined “Win for union and staff at Murdoch University”, quoting Gooding: “It is a win not only for staff at the university, but the union movement more broadly.”

Too many “wins” like this and we’ll really be in trouble.

Conclusion

The Expert Assessment Panel is the jewel in the crown of the whole architecture of the National Framework. The personnel perfectly embody the forces which have led us into the current horrible situation.

As chair of the EAP there is a skilled political operator who helped pioneer Australia’s first steps down the neoliberal path, in education and beyond. As employer representatives we’ve got a former Vice Chancellor who oversaw major attacks on conditions and a bullying management culture, and a senior manager who once attempted to mask such bullying by forcing staff to “promote the positive rather than the negative”.

And nominated from the union side, we have a former unionist who played a senior role in a management team which worsened conditions and targeted union leaders for redundancy, and a union official whose passive industrial strategy has proved no match at all for the aggressive attacks of management.

We have no confidence at all that this Panel will provide any level of security for our jobs, wages, or conditions. The fact that our union’s national leadership expects us to have any confidence in this crew is ample proof of the bankruptcy of the National Framework, the enterprise agreement variations based on it, and the political and industrial vision of the union’s national leadership.

Developing our own strength – by Voting No and organising to resist – is a thousand times better than putting our faith in the Expert Assessment Panel and the wage-cutting architecture they will oversee.