

# Transcript

## Session 1: Pre-election policy landscape – what's on the table?

**SONAL SINGH:** So, Professor Andrew Norton is the Professor of Higher Education Policy at the Monash Business School at Monash University and the session that he's going to be sort of talking about is what's on the table in the pre-election policy landscape, discussing where the major Australian political parties stand when it comes to higher education reform, the future of needs based funding in all the reforms that Adi talked about. It will be interesting to get his views on what he thinks the future holds for us. Over to you, Andrew.

**PROF. ANDREW NORTON:** So, this is 5 to 10 minutes about where I think the politics of this is going to go over the next few weeks and then over the subsequent three years.

So usually higher ed is not much of an issue during election campaigns. Typically, there are relatively minor policies announced towards the end of a campaign period, but I think this year will be different. I think one higher education related issue will be prominent and actually a potential vote changer. So, in particular, that is the 20% cut to student debt promised by Labor, opposed by the Coalition.

There are about 3 million people with student debt. The average cut, 20% cut, would be about \$5,500. I believe this is probably big enough to swing votes and could have a material effect on the outcome of the election.

Also, some important changes to the way people repay their debts and for some, this will be the more immediate practical impact because the 20% cut just lessens the time it takes to repay. It's a little bit unclear what the Coalition will do about that, but I would suspect, given the cost involved, they may oppose those changes as well.

So that's one big difference between the parties, but I actually think in the broad approach to higher education we're probably looking at a fair amount of overlap because what I think we've seen over the last 5 to 10 years is first the Coalition, then Labor and certainly the bureaucracy in Canberra have basically lost confidence in university governance and management. So, all sorts of issues, the non-payment of casuals, the anti-Semitism, sexual assault on campus, there's been a whole long list of areas which has simply undermined the confidence of the political class in what higher education is doing.

So we do have some ongoing measures directly to tackle the governance issues and that will probably go ahead, but what I think we're seeing is, in response to this, we're

seeing a shift away from historical ideas of university autonomy, more recent TEQSA like ideas of risk based regulation towards a more orders based system and towards the department itself rather than TEQSA monitoring things that would have been TEQSA's brief in the past, so the support for students' policy, which began last year, the Student Ombudsman, which began in February, and the gender based violence legislation, which will probably pass later in this year, far more intense regulation of what universities are doing. Historically, there has not been a lot of regulation of the Commonwealth Grant Scheme, but I think that is probably going to come down the track.

On top of this, I think we're going to see an expansion of what I call a transactional approach to policy, which is the Government specifying exactly what they want and forcing universities to acquit to make sure they're delivering on what the Government wanted. Again, my main concern here is around the Commonwealth Grant Scheme or whatever replaces it under the ATEC system.

The major parties are squabbling about how to reduce international student numbers, but that's a shared goal, and as has been the case basically since the global financial crisis, they'll be operating in a tight budgetary environment.

We just heard about ATEC from the department's view of what's going to happen. At the Universities Australia conference back in February Sarah Henderson, the shadow minister, clearly said that the Coalition would not proceed with this, so this is a major change. I have serious reservations about ATEC, so that's maybe not a bad thing, but nevertheless, a very big difference between the parties.

The other issue on here I think we start to which is directly going to affect students generally and equity students in particular is the approach to growth. Here I'm concerned the Government's position, at least as publicly described, isn't necessarily particularly coherent. They want a growth strategy, yet they're also talking about putting much harder caps at the institution level on the number of students. So, at the moment universities can enrol limited numbers of students on a student contribution only basis. Under the Accord process, that would be cut back to probably a few percentage points over your target number of full-time equivalent students. So, unless that base number is much higher than it has been in the past, I think there's a real risk that universities will be rejecting students they otherwise would have taken, which will be difficult to keep equity students, who tend to be disproportionately affected by these cutbacks.

Against that, Labor is promising what they call effectively demand driven funding for equity or underrepresented students, but this is through a mechanism which I'm certainly struggling to understand and I think others in the sector are also struggling. The Coalition, they talk about aspirations but no concrete detail.

We just heard about needs based funding and heard something was actually quite positive, which I didn't know before. So, I had been very concerned that the Government was approaching needs based funding, so this demand driven needs based funding, through the other grants program. The problem with that is that essentially is a matter of ministerial whim and so if there is a change in government, the needs-based funding would not proceed simply by a ministerial decision, no need to go to the Parliament. So, I was very pleased to hear that this will be legislated in future. As I note on the slide, there could be some different priorities around the equity groups, but I think the Coalition is broadly sympathetic to increasing participation.

Just finally, this issue of whether there will be a minority government or a majority government. So, a lot of the pundits are predicting a minority government where one of the parties will need to secure the support of cross benches to form a working majority in the Parliament for confidence and supply issues.

An important thing about a confidence and supply agreement is it doesn't restrict how they can vote on other legislation before the Parliament. The Greens have pretty clear views on higher education. They want it to be free and to expand access. The Teals have been pretty engaged on higher education issues, I think I've spoken to at least the offices of most of them over the last three years, and I think they would be sympathetic to equity issues. So as part of negotiating passage of higher ed legislation through the Parliament, I think they could be useful allies of the higher education sector in general and equity advocates in particular. So, thanks, Sonal.

**SONAL SINGH:** Thanks, Andrew. That was quite useful and already there's a lot of questions in there, but we will move on to Maria for the next presentation. So Professor Maria Raciti is the Co-founder and Co-director of the University of the Sunshine Coast Indigenous and Transcultural Research Centre. She will actually be talking to us, given all the election that is happening, all the uncertainty that is happening in the sector, how do we sort of what are the tools and tricks that we need as equity practitioners and as policymakers and as people leading the sector to be able to make some sense of navigating through this change. So over to you, Maria.

**PROF. MARIA RACITI:** Thank you. Thank you, and I'm coming to you today from beautiful Gubbi Gubbi up here on the Sunshine Coast.

So, thanks for the invitation. It's been wonderful to listen so far to Adi and Andrew and I'm sure we're all stating the obvious, it's an important inflection point in equity policy and it's a bit different to what we've experienced in the past because the pathway forward is not as clear.

So, I wanted to share with you today some insights or ideas from social marketing. So social marketing is about using marketing tools and techniques which are effectively

psychology and sociology to bring together change for the common good or change for all.

One of the key things we talk about in social marketing is the fact that we all, as individuals, as teams, as universities, as the sector, have finite resources, so we have limited time, money and energy, and what we want to do is allocate those resources in ways that are both meaningful and purposeful, but also that bring about the real transformation that we're seeking in what we do every day. So as humans, what we do is we seek predictability and why this matter is predictability gives us confidence, it gives us directions, but the challenge is that we live in unpredictable times.

What I'd like to talk to you today is about this idea of the VUCA world. Now, some of you may have heard of this before and seen this framework, it's a popular one that's been around, but it's an important one because when we're looking at equity policy, sometimes we need to take that birds eye perspective because what's happening around us and what we're seeing in terms of the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of what we're going to talk about today is not uncommon. It's very much a part of the modern world that we live in.

The challenges that are around this is that when we take a birds eye perspective, it matters because it allows us to come up with ways that we respond rather than react to policy changes. We want to be thoughtful and deliberate in the way that we allocate our finite resources.

So VUCA was developed in the late 1980s. It's a strategic leadership tool and it both describes the modern world, but also offers us some solutions about a way forward or the next best step, which is what I'm sure many people are thinking about today.

What VUCA means is that we're seeking predictability and what the social marketing research tells us is that often when we're faced with unpredictability, like we are now, we often respond in three ways with our heart, our heads and our hands. What I mean by that is we often have an emotional reaction uncertainty, fear, anxiety, worry.

We also then respond with our heads after that in terms of cognitively, what can we do next, what's the next best stop, how can I allocate these resources? And then in terms of responding with our hands, that's operationalising and doing what we want to do. So you, your team, you might be feeling unsettled and uncomfortable and that's that emotional heart reaction. Then the next best step is probably what we're all thinking about at the moment, so that's that cognitive response, and we all know that something needs to be done, but we don't quite know what that is.

So VUCA is an acronym. It describes the modern world that we live in and it also helps to I guess reframe the complexity that we're seeing around equity policy.

So, with VUCA, what it means is four things, so volatility. What we're seeing is this rapid and unpredictable nature of change. So, the environment demands that we react rather than respond and that's sort of what you might be seeing in yourself and your team around you, but it's important that we respond in ways that allocate our resources well and that achieve the purpose that we're all here for.

With uncertainty, the environment requires us to take action without certainty. Now, that's an issue because it sort of rubs up against our training and it also rubs up against higher ed. You know, in sectors like higher ed, there is a high premium placed on certainty and decision making, that there's a sense of predictability if we do A, then B will happen. It's sort of baked in. So in our current environment, and as Andrew has just talked about, we're seeing lots of gaps in knowledge, which means that we're sort of trying to figure out what's the next best step to take, but I don't have full knowledge and that's a common part of the VUCA framework.

Complexity is also a big part of this and as we saw, there's many moving parts to the equity policy practice and scholarship that we have in our sector. The environment is dynamic and there's many interdependencies. A connects to B connects to C and there's all of these types of interactions.

What this means is that this interconnectedness makes it difficult to figure out what to do next, and some of you might be feeling that. You might be seeing all these moving parts and go where do I leverage the system, what do I focus on?

And the last part there is about ambiguity and I know there's that phrase out there delicious ambiguity about embracing ambiguity, but most of us don't really sort of go into that. So ambiguity is this idea that our environment is unfamiliar and outside of our expertise, but ambiguity is that we also challenge to diagnose the situation. So often there's that saying, you know, 70% of the solution is in diagnosing the problem, but we can't really diagnose what's going on. As Andrew has presented, there's many gaps in our knowledge and therefore we have gaps in our understanding, which makes it ambiguous as to what to do and how to go about the next change.

One of the things we know in the sector is that there's many known knowns. We've known about a few of those policy issues for a while and we've sort of known how the politics flows out about those. But there's also known unknowns, which Andrew talked about then. There's areas where we don't quite know what the position is and what the implications are.

There's a third area, which is called the unknown unknowns. That means we just don't know what we don't know. So if you're experiencing that or feeling that, that's often a very common part of the ambiguity that's surrounding the current agenda.

So where to next, what do we do, how do we go forward? Well, we can address volatility with vision. I'll pop those up first and what we can do here in this space as actual tools that you can do today is to it's a great opportunity to now revisit your values and purpose, be clear and be firm about your why, why are you doing what you're doing, how are you operating. This is really important because when we ground our decisions in values and purpose, we rise above volatility and what we do is we become the calm in the storm. Particularly if you're a team leader, you may find that others in your team may be new to the sort of experiences that some of us have been through a few times before.

Also, in responding to volatility, it's a really great point to asset map. Look at the knowledge, skills and network that your team possesses, but also across the sector. This is really key because the social network or the social capital that we have across the sector is something that we can leverage to our strengths and it's something that should be acknowledged. We are as an equity community an agentic, connected, generous community and that is our strength. So, we should be looking for ways to work together across institutions, perhaps in smaller collectives, to actually bring up some ideas that we can move forward with in the next few weeks and pre-election time.

In terms of addressing uncertainty, the best way forward is with understanding. Now, investing in some scenario planning is also a possible way forward if this happens, then this is what we can do; you know, if A happens, then we will zig when they zag. I'd like to encourage this idea of creating task forces not only alone within institutions, but perhaps across others and this is where sort of network connectors like EPHIA and ACSES can play a role in bringing people together.

This scenario of planning is important because we start to build up contingency strategies. It also starts at I guess that need that we have for predictability and plans going forward. We want to know what options we have in terms of addressing particular issues as they arise.

The next one along is complexity and we respond to complexity with clarity. Now is the most important time within the equity community to have clear and streamlined communications, both within and across the sector, the universities within the sector. It's a really important point to have those feedback loops so that teams are aware of decisions and even just sharing those visions, values, purposes and sharing information that's out there.

It's an important time too to spend and invest time in your data. Know your equity data, know your patterns, know the patterns at the micro, meso and macro level that are around us, but you're looking for two things. It's not just looking at the data. You're looking for two things. You're looking for what's called the low leverage points, where a

small effort or a small change, perhaps within your institution, perhaps within your policy, can lead to big results, so small change, big results.

The other thing to also look for in that data is what we call high leverage points, where you might invest a lot of time and effort, those finite resources, but it only leads to a small result in effectively addressing the change that's needed.

Lastly, there's the idea of building in agility as a way to address ambiguity. This is a really key time in the next few weeks to invest in targeted professional development with your team or yourself to optimise or activate your team's growth mindset. It's really key. Look, as equity people and in the equity community, resilience and adaptability are what we do every day, they're our core business, so a big part of responding to ambiguity is doing what we know because we know what to do because we do it every day.

One of the things if there's one take away I can give you that I'd really like you to think about, it is to see that all change brings with it opportunities and I think it's really important to focus on that. When I teach, often I say to my students you're looking for the acorns, not the oak trees. Look for the possibilities because change brings with it these apertures for innovation, to evolve the sector, to streamline, to address other issues. So bringing that mindset of agility to the current context I think will help see us move forward in very positive ways.

So, coming lastly, the idea is that this pre-election time is a great opportunity to power up as a community, as individuals, as universities across the sector by empowering us, we should focus on what is strong, not what is wrong. There's many pockets of brilliance in the equity space across the sector, so let's leverage these, let's work together and this is a great way that we can move forward in these uncertain times.

**SONAL SINGH:** Thank you, Maria, and a really important reminder regarding having a strengths-based approach and having the community spirit and it's also about making sure we do take care of the equity practitioners that are working in the sector as well.