Debbie McVitty’s [recent piece](https://wonkhe.com/blogs/letter-from-australia-the-power-of-perception/) on what politicians think of universities got me thinking. It’s a question that is seldom asked because the default position of universities is to *tell* politicians what they *should* think.

Obviously, some politicians get universities and the big picture more than others. But it seems to me that universities don’t do themselves too many favours in relation to public perception.
There’s been a couple of stories in the last week or so that must make both politicians and your average Joe Blow glibly dismissive of universities’ eternal pitch for more taxpayer funding. Both position universities as motivated purely by greed and glibly dismissive of student’s academic experience and outcomes.

The first was an expose on “4 Corners” about how Murdoch University has been accepting international students with English below its published IELTS standards and others for whom the test was waived completely. Basically, they had been stacking some of their postgraduate courses with Indian and Nepalese students who, literally, had no idea as to what it was they were supposed to be learning.

The story came after three whistleblower academics had tried – unsuccessfully – to raise their concerns with management when they found students using Google Translate to understand lectures and IT students who didn’t know how to use a USB stick. Failure rates were exceptionally high and academic misconduct cases commonplace.

The report also named the University of Tasmania and Southern Cross University as informing education agents they were happy to waive English language tests.

All three universities have posted deficits in recent years and none are major attractors of international students. The sector average in 2017 was 21% international students, whereas Murdoch had just 9.8%, Tasmania 13.9% and Southern Cross 15.7%. Sydney University, by contrast, has an eye-watering 35% international student cohort, begging the question how many is too many?

Certainly, funding in Australia is predicated on the fact that balancing the books is based on attracting international students. While the demand driven system has been bountiful for most universities, some have struggled to attract additional domestic and international enrolments – leading the aforementioned deficits.

That takes us to another question (one which has been very much on the agenda in the UK): should universities be allowed to fail? The question is particularly relevant for an institution like Murdoch, which has been wracked by scandals and the departure of its two previous vice-chancellors under less-than-stellar circumstances in recent years. It’s also in a very crowded market – five universities in a state with a population of just 2.5 million people. Merger talks come and go on a semi-regular basis, but nothing ever happens.

In the meantime, Murdoch put out a statement completely denying the content of the “4 Corners” program – an act that just confirms it’s arrogance.

How would politicians and others view Murdoch and it’s ilk after watching that show. Not very highly, I’d imagine, unleashing untold reputational damage to other universities in the sector.

**Bringing in the bucks**

The second story that casts a poor light on the sector came as a result of Charles Sturt University and a damning assessment of its oversight of students in city-based study centres
run by an international outfit called Study Group. The regulator TEQSA got the shock of its life when it did its due diligence during CSU’s reregistration regime.

The aim of the game for CSU is to maximise enrolments and minimise costs – which they successfully did, but neglected to properly educate their students along the way.

(Ironically, Study Group Australia is chaired by Ian Goulter, a former vice-chancellor of – you guessed it – Charles Sturt University.)

The use of third parties to run aspects of university operations is on the rise, according to a recent report by academics from La Trobe University. The researchers found 22 of Australia’s 38 universities had a policy relating to third party delivery, but said it was possible the remaining 15 were also engaged in similar arrangements, but it was impossible to know from the information available.

Third parties, despite having oversight of a rapidly growing cohort of students, are not registered with TEQSA and it is up to universities to quality control their activities. The regulator only peels open the curtains to have a look when the university comes up for reregistration – which is only every seven years. (CSU had its registration time frame reduced to four years as a result of the serious broaches found by TEQSA. It also has to give TEQSA the minutes of each of its council and academic board meetings for a year, with proof it is doing analysis of attrition and student performance.

Reading McVitty’s interview with MP James Frith, I was moved by his comment that “the more universities are thinking about value-for-money student experience and life beyond the university campus – employability, job prospects, livability, standard of living etc – the better the sector looks”.

The fact is that a number of universities are making the sector look shabby. Seriously shabby. Their vice-chancellors get rewarded handsomely, nonetheless. Andy Vann, CSU’s boss, got a handsome $780,000 in 2017. That just seem good enough.