

## Module 14 – The politics of Australian higher education

Authors: Agnes Bosanquet and Cathy Rytmeister

Year: 2017

**Agnes Bosanquet**

I'm Agnes Bosanquet

**Cathy Rytmeister**

And I'm Cathy Rytmeister

**Agnes Bosanquet**

So Cathy, what does the politics of higher education really mean?

**Cathy Rytmeister**

Well we really need to start with a broad definition of the term politics in this context. One way to think of politics is that it is a non-violent method of allocating resources to groups with diverse and often competing interests. It always involves the exercise of power and a level of negotiation between those who hold it – if it's going to stay non-violent of course.

**Agnes Bosanquet**

So who has the power in higher education?

**Cathy Rytmeister**

The obvious answer is the Federal government since they provide so much of the funding. But students and their families are paying tuition fees - and they vote - so they have power too in relation to both the institutions and governments. University staff and the institutions themselves have power that derives from their roles as creators, curators and disseminators of knowledge, or as supporters or leaders of those processes. Then there are the employers of graduates, and the people who compile the international rankings and the media that loves to publish the scandals.

**Agnes Bosanquet**

So everybody wants a piece of higher education. Staff want jobs. Students want to learn and gain qualifications. Employers want qualified workers. People want doctors, and lawyers, and teachers, and nurses. Not to mention a strong economy. And governments want to make sure they keep all of those groups happy enough to keep voting for them.

So governments have to enact policies to balance all those needs while being able to pay for it. And because resources are finite, institutions compete with one another. We also have to compete with higher education sectors internationally and with all of the other industries and services that governments and business control and provide.

Do the people who work in higher education really have to understand all of that?

Does it affect our everyday work?

## CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO UNIVERSITY TEACHING COURSE

**Cathy Rytmeister**

Well what do you think?

**Agnes Bosanquet**

Well, if the government cuts funding - or when the government cuts funding that puts more pressure on us. This high demand for some courses we enrol more students in them and need more staff to teach them. With rankings being so important we're really pushed to produce more research. Plus, with student paying more money for their courses they really want the best and latest we can give them in teaching and technology.

**Cathy Rytmeister**

And why do different governments have such different ideas about how to govern universities anyway?

**Agnes Bosanquet**

Ah well, that really does bring us back to politics doesn't it.

If you want to change higher education in any way your power comes from your knowledge of how it works.

**Cathy Rytmeister**

Well, we'd better get stuck into this module.



This resource is part of the *Contemporary Approaches to University Teaching* Course available through the [Canvas Network](#) under a [CC Attribution Share Alike](#) license.