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Acknowledgments
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The 2024 Judging Panel and Sponsors of the Australian Financial Review Higher Education Awards

University Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors, and former Vice Chancellors

Distinguished guests

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the unceded lands on which this building stands and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

Let me begin by congratulating all those with AFR Higher Education Awards this year and thank those involved with the decision. It is an honour.

I have been fortunate to have a lifetime in universities.

And it has been a life (not only a career) that I have loved. 2024 is the first year of my adult life that I have not been in a university.

Yet as an emeriti and alumni of Australian universities I have not left universities in fact or in feeling.

Early in my term as Vice Chancellor and President of RMIT I had the privilege of learning from 'my' first Chancellor, Professor Dennis Gibson, one of the most significant Vice Chancellors of those remarkable Dawkins years in Australian higher education.
He was the first Vice Chancellor of QUT and founder of the ATN group - a group currently celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Dennis gave me a novel by J.C. Masterman titled “To Teach the Senators Wisdom”. This wry and perceptive unpacking of what made Oxford University great (written in the 1950s) resonates today, because it was addressing some fundamental questions that continue to be and should be central to the future of universities, and to which I will return.

Tonight, I want to reflect on the major changes for universities from the 1980s and where this has taken us, and to finish with some thoughts for leaders and policy-makers on where we should be going.

Masterman was reflecting in his book on the key features of a great education in a great institution.

Rarely during my many years in universities were the offerings of Australian universities compared favourably with the romantic ideal of an undergraduate education, whether Oxbridge ‘dreaming spires’ or US colleges grand stone and wood.

Yet I would not swap my years, in many different universities in Australia, for any other life.

Indeed, I would observe that from when I began as a student at the University of Sydney in the 1970s to 2023 when I resigned as President and Vice Chancellor of Monash University, the quality of teaching, research, student services and campuses improved measurably and immeasurably in Australian universities.

At the risk of sceptical eye-brow raising at this observation, let me reflect on the major changes during my time in Australian universities, their significance and contribution to that improvement.

How did the 1970s and 80s look and feel as a student in an Australian university?
When I began in a Bachelor of Economics, first in my family, standing in a courtyard surrounded by entirely unfamiliar faces, access to university was just opening up. Yet less than 15% of the 19-year-old population made it to campus then; there was restricted choice among and flexibility in degrees; teaching quality was highly variable; and overseas exchange and

study abroad, as well as internships and work-integrated learning were not part of the student experience.

When I began as a postgraduate in that same university, support for research and supervision of research was highly variable; and access to research materials was very much in the hand-crafted physical library/archive mode, before digitisation and ubiquitous computing.

As a woman, I was in the minority (less than 40%) in my degree, even less in my Honours classes. In the sector the PhD cohort was less than 25% female, but no other females in my group at the time.

It was a male world, and you knew it because of the rarity of female academics, particularly senior ones - and the very few female toilets!

Yet in those years, I found a lively group of fellow students (and none of us shared a high school); I had passing acquaintanceship with my undergraduate lecturers and tutors. I really found my tribe as a postgraduate and sessional tutor.
As I entered my life as an academic, the world of universities was changing profoundly.

Despite the Gothic revival architecture of the Australian universities founded in the 19th century, Australia began with the notion that its universities were there to serve the needs of the economy, principally through educating the professions.
So, the changes transforming Australian universities from the 1980s leant into that early utilitarian purpose.

The major changes have been:

1. The creation of mass access and participation in our universities built on structural and funding reform;
2. Internationalisation and globalisation permeating the nature of education and research undertaken; and, as a consequence of the first two,

3. The rise of Australian public universities as a recognised high-quality sector, among the best in the world.

Just one indicator of this last contention: when I began my PhD it was still thought that going overseas was the best choice (and choosing a US or UK university was urged on me).

Yet now thousands of students from other nations come to Australian universities to undertake their PhDs or postgraduate education.

Mass participation in university education - after Dawkins.

The structural reforms instituted by Dawkins created large, comprehensive, multi-campus public universities. They still dominate the provision of higher education in Australia.
This structural reform was underpinned by changed government funding systems which have persisted - with increasing tinkering.

The major innovation was a student contribution scheme (HECS now HELP) with funding following number of students enrolled and with domestic student fees repaid through the taxation system.

Research funding became increasingly dominated by competitive granting programs.

Access to a university education grew dramatically, boosted by the period of demand driven funding from 2012 to 2017.

Australia now has over 41% of the 19-year-old population in higher education, doubling the participation of 1989 (Norton 2023).

While the socio-economically advantaged disproportionately access higher education, Australia has achieved mass participation and much higher access to university education. We still maintain an enviable (in world comparisons) level of social mobility fueled in large part by this access (Productivity Commission 2024).

The Australian university system has also achieved high levels of choice among degrees, flexibility of offering, and low costs when changing courses.

All support retention of students and completion of degrees, where Australia performs well compared to many other nations (OECD 2023).

The increase in access to university education, the relatively high levels of completion, and the consequent social mobility are the product of the Dawkins reforms. They remain goals worth pursuing for the good of the nation.

The other Dawkins effect was funding and policy parameters which reinforced uniformity of behaviour and even aspiration among Australian public universities.

This is a mixed blessing. It provides quality benchmarks, accountabilities and expectations that are largely uniform. This has been reinforced by an increasing number of regulations and regulators.

However, it also drives towards uniformity of mission and mitigates against major experimentation and innovation.

Australia experimented with dual sector universities, principally in Victoria, while specialist institutions remain very few. There have been no further amalgamations in the last quarter century and arguably only two major curriculum innovations, Melbourne model and 'bloc' model, at University of Melbourne and Victoria University respectively.
More successful has been the dissemination of online and digital curriculum innovations, but incentives to imitation are much higher than those to differentiation.

The question of whether benefits outweigh costs from the structure of the system is only sporadically debated.

Internationalisation and globalisation - unintended consequences.

The second major change has been the rapid growth of international education, following decisions in the mid-1980s to allow Australian universities to charge and retain fees from international students.

Australian universities expanded dramatically as students from South-East Asia initially, and then from the Indo-Pacific, enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

International students in 2022 made up around 27% of total university students in Australia (Department of Education, Australian Government 2023) down from over 30% prior to the COVID years. The impact went from being around 17% of total university revenue in 2010 to almost 25% in 2022 (Department of Education: 2024).

Australia is now the most internationalised university education system of scale in the world.

Internationalisation of this scale leads to modifications of formerly nationally focussed curricula to meet international accreditations and contexts. It ensures domestic students are prepared for the professional and technical circumstances of countries other than Australia.

From the 1990s, several Australian universities established overseas campuses and educational agreements which saw them teach and assess beyond Australian shores.

These campuses, while small, compared to total international education in Australia, remain among the longest established and largest globalisation of any nation's higher education system.

Here is a key differentiation among Australian universities, the nature and scale of their internationalisation (Gardner, 2013: 275). We may be alike at home, but offshore is a different story.

After 20 years of leading universities with more than one offshore campus, the work of establishing, changing ownership arrangements and profile, meeting other nation's goals and

requirements, and integrating it with the university in Australia has challenges and opportunities – but it brings global capabilities and partnerships with few equals in the world.

This internationalisation is not driven by the funding imperatives of the national system. Instead, it represents a strategic commitment to creating a university with a mission and profile quite distinct in trajectory from our national system.

International education requires clear strategy and long-term commitment to and investment in what is fundamental to quality university education and research.

A more recent response to the growth of international education has been the growth of global rankings of universities.

This transformed national conversations from when the ARWU, constructed in Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003, was quickly followed by others in benchmarking 'world-class' universities.

These rankings provide information to international students about the 'quality' of the universities where they might study.

However, rankings are also salient in national policies of higher education across the world. They reinforced an increasing trend to understand research quality through metrics, principally international citation and publication measures.

As research performance metrics dominated global rankings of universities, the globalisation of assessment of research quality came to dominate the assessment of the quality of universities.

And without labouring the point about how internationalisation has changed Australian universities, national research expenditure (about $12.7b in 2020) is deeply reliant on international earnings. Our public universities provide more than 50% of that research

expenditure from their own income, some philanthropic, some industry or commercial, and a large and sustaining proportion from international student fees.

Among the best university sectors in the world.

In 2024, using the Times Higher Education Rankings, 78% of Australian universities were in the top 500, compared to around 38% of UK universities and only about 4% of US universities. Whatever romance may cling to the stone and spires of 'elite' universities elsewhere, Australian students are more likely to go to a home-grown world-ranked university. Indeed over a quarter study at a university ranked in the top 100 in the world, compared to half that proportion in the UK and less than 10% in the US (The Koala News 2024).

This is one of the outcomes of globalisation and of the internationalisation that made that performance possible.

When the first students stepped on the Monash University campus in 1961, it was over a century since University of Melbourne was established in 1853 in a colony of 150,000 people. In 1961 there were around 2.8m people in Victoria. Monash enrolled international students, but it was a domestic, nationally focused university.

In half a century, those two universities together educate over 150,000 students a year, most domestic, but each with more international students than you would find in most top 100 universities.

Indeed between 2014 and 2024, Monash moved into the top 50 in the world, joining the University of Melbourne.

We should celebrate what has been achieved in our Australian universities. It was not won easily through continuously growing guaranteed funding, or grants to venture offshore, or teaching small classes, or classes of students with uniform educational backgrounds.

Such achievements carry costs; but, on balance, were we a better university system in 1961 or 1971 than in 2021? People feel more comfortable with the familiar, with small scale, with less change rather than more.

But Australian universities made brave choices, built muscle from mass and plotted a trajectory to global quality. This is a story of learning, growing and succeeding. What do we wish for the future?

Where are we going?

When you transform from elite to mass and from the local to international, the policy contexts change and so should policy responses.
In my lifetime, public universities have become increasingly central to the qualifications needed to practice in most professional and occupational areas.
And from the education of graduates, through the creation and application of new knowledge, to the export income generated and injected into the Australian economy, universities are pivotal to national goals and outcomes.

This has drawn greater attention from more government policy domains with increased regulation of universities and more regular interventions over the last few decades.
Without addressing the elephant in the room, sustainable and effective government funding of higher education and research, universities have been subject to good, sometimes pioneering, as well as bad regulation. Clear policy frameworks for new areas have been overshadowed by detailed interventions that degrade key features of universities.

After the ill-advised and counterproductive changes of Job Ready Graduates, which tried by crude changes to student contributions to induce changes in student preferences and enrolments, we have seen similarly confused arguments arise around international students.
The notion that a central national 'hand' can fine tune the flow of skilled professionals into key occupational areas by manipulating student choice at point of enrolment is what Sir Humphrey would have rightly termed 'courageous'.

Clear frameworks and goals, fewer 'new' programs rather than better, continuing programs and policy, transparent criteria not proliferating targets, and regular review of outcomes over a reasonable and relevant timeframe, informed by experts, will produce more public benefit.

Learning through careful, considered, consultative implementation is what works, not controlling through very specific rules and regulations.

Where should we be going? Advice for leaders and policy-makers.

The current outcomes of Australian universities are a mixed product of intended and unintended consequences – the hoped for increase in access and graduates of the Dawkins reforms, added to the unimagined internationalisation and globalisation and rise of the sector in the world.

And many of the great successes came from public universities finding their own way with guidance but not much intervention, and a stable policy framework.

If we want continued success, we must encourage incentives to experiment and innovate – and that depends in turn on coherent long run policy that engages over the longer term with individual universities and their various group configurations.

We should accept Canberra has now split government funding for higher education and research and consider each as separate bundles with distinct goals and outcomes.

There will still be beneficial interplay between the two in single institutions, but we must make each work separately in quality and innovation.

For example, we cannot continue to assume indirect costs of research and research equipment are going to be 'solved' by education funding.

Put simply, stop trying to solve short-term 'problems' by constant tinkering with the settings of complex institutions with long-run goals and commitments.

Set frameworks for long-run goals and purpose, recognising that universities are there for the future we cannot currently clearly see or sometimes even imagine.

Give room in frameworks and policy for experimentation and innovation, be prepared to try, learn and rethink, not set in stone the change you currently think is required and insist it be applied to all.

I have learnt from a lifetime in this sector, there's always someone (and usually many more) in the room, who are smarter than you. Go for guiding towards outcomes, not telling them how to do it.
They'll always show you something you didn't expect!

To close with Masterman and his Oxford guide-book.

The guide-book sought to capture and reveal the "secret" of Oxford. After exploring many aspects of undergraduate life at Oxford, the project was abandoned.

Universities turn out to be ever-changing and changed by those who walk onto campus – it's the vitality from which much can be gained.

Masterman comments:
"Isn't it right that every generation should live its own life and worship its own gods? … [that every year when the new class arrives] ..the great age dawns for them and the golden years begin. We're here to help them if we can, not to impose our standards and our views and our rules of conduct upon them…. [F]or each individual it is a different secret - and each must find it for himself [sic]" (Masterman: 1952:274)

Masterman wrote for a different time and place, yet offers wisdom for whenever we are tempted to tinker with the legislation, the funding formulae or the regulations.

He stresses learning.

We should aim for a system that is flexible enough to allow the finding of own ways and new ways, one that doesn't constrain those within it to follow only the prescribed.

A framework that keeps focus on the broad goals and purpose of universities, not on further augmentation of the set of rules that were seen to be a good idea at the time the last change was made.

Our nation might need skills and research applied to current problems, but this is not the sum of what universities are for or what they might and can do.

We should hope for a system that can reach beyond the immediate and beyond our national borders. And to do that we need a system with scale and diversity, one that can roll with - and against - the unintended consequences from the futures we don't expect. A sector able to seek better futures.

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