



| INTERVIEW

## FINDING UNITY IN DIVERSITY AND A FORCE FOR GOOD IN THE WORLD

UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA CHIEF EXECUTIVE CATRIONA JACKSON



**Q:** As Chief Executive of Universities Australia, you have insight into the breadth of our university sector. What role do universities play in contemporary society?

**A:** Universities are engines of hope and prosperity. They have the power to transform the lives of individuals and the communities they live in. When someone goes to university, their world expands, and they often see new possibilities. We must never forget how powerful and important that can be, particularly so for people from backgrounds of serious adversity or disadvantage.

All of this adds to the foundational role universities play in the economy, delivering the skilled graduate workforce we need in a rapidly changing economic landscape. And universities are profound game-changers through research. By advancing knowledge, by making discoveries and breakthroughs, universities shift the boundaries, making the impossible possible. And that's as true for blue sky research as it is for all of the industry-engaged activity universities do including collaborative research with business and in internships and work placements for students in the workplace while they continue to study. Thirdly, universities are often the hub of communities. They are a place of community gatherings, centres of local community and cultural activity, providers of low-cost or no-cost community and sporting facilities, and they bring people together to find common ground with each other.

**Q:** What are you particularly passionate about in the sector, and what would you change?

**A:** Every day in this job I think about Australians whose lives have

been transformed by universities. They include people spared painful or fatal health conditions thanks to research breakthroughs achieved by universities. But I also think about the everyday Australians from pretty modest backgrounds whose future is brighter because of a university education. One of those is Chris Mills, who features in a video that Universities Australia made last year. Chris was a blue-collar worker in the steelworks at Whyalla for 13 years. He knew he couldn't do that job forever. So he enrolled in a pathway program at the University of South Australia. He's now doing a social work degree with the aim of helping others in his community cope with the major economic transition underway in this heavy-industry town. His life has been changed and you can hear the growing confidence and senses of hope for the future as he tells his story. Another of these stories is Edith Cowan University graduate Shari Pilkington, who was inspired by her Nan – one of Australia's earliest Aboriginal nurses and author of *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, whose degree took her into a career as a midwife. There are literally thousands more stories like theirs.

**Q:** There seems to be a sort of resignation in the sector that the public good role of universities isn't always widely recognised. What are your reflections?

**A:** Rather than talking ourselves into a funk, we should take every single opportunity to remind people about the public good that universities deliver. Many

already know much about the profound contribution their local university makes. When I'm advocating on behalf of our universities in the media, I always try and shine a spotlight on the benefits that universities deliver in their communities. And I think the public gets this. There is significant understanding among the Australian public about the value of universities, the value of our research, the huge benefits to Australia of having international students study here, and the very high quality of our globally competitive university sector.

**Q:** How should universities communicate their institutional narratives and tangible outcomes around engagement to ensure their public good role is given greater prominence to Government and the wider public?

**A:** We need to tell those stories. Over and over again. There's an adage in political communication. It's that it is only when you are so thoroughly sick and tired of hearing yourself say the same thing over and over again, can you expect people beyond your immediate circle to begin to hear and absorb your message. So we need to double down on that storytelling. And we need to convey the passion that we feel about what universities do in and for their communities. Economic analysis of the contribution of universities is rightly important. It helps us to make a hard-headed economic case. But it only takes us so far. We also need to

speak to people's hearts as well as their heads. And that's what our team seeks to do with Universities Australia's award-winning public awareness campaign *Keep It Clever* – especially our videos. And that's also what we have done with our *#1inHalfAMillion* campaign highlighting why international students are so good for Australia.

**Q:** The unique role universities have in their own local communities is, to some extent, more highly valued at the individual local level rather than the collective national level. As a sector, how do we harness the goodwill afforded to our universities locally, and leverage this nationally?

**A:** I agree this role is often most clearly understood at the local community level. And that local understanding can be an asset when we tell the story nationally of university engagement in their local communities. So we should always be thinking about how to deploy those local voices to national audiences. It's terrifically powerful for a local Aboriginal Elder or business owner or not-for-profit service to be able to tell their story to a national audience about how their local university has worked closely with them to the profound benefit of that local community. So those local connections can be some of our most powerful advocates and ambassadors.

**Q:** Would you like to see an increasingly diverse set of missions amongst universities in Australia, greater conformity, or do we have it about right? How challenging will it be to maintain unity in such diversity?

**A:** I'd question the assumption that a similar federal funding formula for public universities across the country has led to uniformity of either institutional missions or delivery. Of course, all of our universities strive to deliver high-quality education and research and to play an active role in the lives of their local communities. But if you think about the breadth of what Australia's universities offer – both through their teaching and learning programs, but also in their areas of research concentration – it's actually significantly diverse. So you will see quantum computing research teams in Sydney and Melbourne racing to build the world's first working quantum computer, and you'll see agricultural or marine researchers working with farmers and coastal industries on specific local challenges that affect their local industries and communities. And all of those pieces of research are important. The same can be said of the breadth of degrees and the content they teach. There are some foundational concepts that are taught in similar ways across the country. But there are plenty of examples of how being located in a specific community enables the content of degrees to evolve and take account of the local needs in that community. So a health practitioner student doing their degree in



a community with a specific set of health challenges might find more content about that local context in their course materials and teaching.

**Q:** How do you see funding cuts affecting future opportunities and access to higher education for Australians?

**A:** University funding cuts limit opportunity. The current funding freeze amounts to cuts of \$2.1 billion in coming years, which will erode access for some Australians to a university education. So that's a serious concern. It's not just a setback for opportunity – it's also a setback for Australia's economy, and for our future skilled workforce and

productivity. So we have urged a policy rethink because of the social and economic hits that cuts will inflict. Our universities have tried hard to minimise the loss of student places in the first year of the cuts – but they don't have the financial means to do so in coming years. The cuts must end and the demand-driven system and indexation must be restored so that talented Australians don't miss out on a place at university.

**Q:** Is the university experience now seen as just a commodity, with the popular press on occasions defining it as largely monetised and able to be bought by those who have the funds?



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**A:** I don't believe that's the prevailing opinion of everyday Australians. There is very strong aspiration among parents and grandparents for their children and grandchildren to have the chance of a university education. And that's not just because of the lifetime earnings advantage for graduates of \$800,000 for men and \$600,000 for women. It's often about non-monetary value of a university education. They want them to learn the rigour of thought that a great university education imbues, to be able to analyse and problem-solve and acquire the sort of skills that will be even more important in the coming machine age. And they want them to be have the kind of truly international education that comes when they sit in university tutorials with

classmates from the region and all around the world – seeing issues from a variety of viewpoints. The other point to be made is that Australia is blessed to have a well-designed income-contingent student loans scheme that ensures talented students don't face the barrier of upfront fees. Our HECS-HELP scheme is the envy of the world and it is an investment in our social cohesion, prosperity and talent.

**Q:** What is the 'everyday delight' in your role working with, and representing the sector?

**A:** Every day I am reminded of what fabulous places universities are. Where else do you get to go to work or study each day

to talk about ideas, wrestle with issues, and work to solve the problems that bested us and uncover vast new opportunities. I am very lucky that I'm able to glimpse first-hand the myriad inspiring things that our universities make happen. Walk onto any campus and you will see for yourself a young person growing before your eyes as they see new opportunities opening up before them. You'll see researchers working in teams to better understand the world around us, to help us all to navigate it, to make life saving breakthroughs and conduct life-enriching work. So there is inspiration and delight every single day. I am very fortunate to work with clever, passionate, inspiring people who work and study in our universities and at Universities Australia. It's a privilege to speak for a sector that is such a force for good in the world.