



| VIEWPOINT

RAISE THE SCARLET STANDARD HIGH

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS



To be valued by peers is the most important recognition possible, and I am deeply grateful for this AFR Higher Education Lifetime Achievement Award.

In accepting the award, I have been asked to reflect on being a Vice Chancellor after three years in the role at Griffith University, and nearly 14 at the

University of Melbourne. Every vice-chancellor's experience is different. Circumstances change, the possible one day becomes unimaginable the next. Context is everything, and few people listen to advice anyway. So if I offer five observations drawn from my time as a Vice-Chancellor, it is in the certain knowledge they will be no use to you whatsoever!

1

THEY DON'T NEED YOU

The professors at the University of Melbourne fought off suggestions of a professional full-time Vice Chancellor for nearly its first 80 years. The issue came to a head when the last part-time Vice Chancellor – Sir John Monash no less – quit in frustration, famously declaring that he found it easier to lead an army on the Western Front than to run a university. But the Melbourne professors had a point. They could happily make curriculum and manage resources without a Chief Executive, and subsequently hounded the first full-time Vice Chancellor, Raymond Priestley (1935-38) from office in just three years.

Sentiment has little changed in universities. They don't need you, with your fancy title and extravagant benefits. So to endure, a vice-chancellor must show she brings some benefit to justify the inconvenience.

Of course, much vice-chancellorial work is external and therefore largely invisible to the professors – representing the university to government and business, enthusing the alumni, asking donors for money.

But one responsibility matters for everyone within the university. This is strategy: guiding the priorities that mean we do some things but not others, that we ensure the university articulates, and lives by, its aspirations.

Strategy requires a full armoury of skills – values, vision, clarity, communication, an implementation plan, evaluation, reporting back. It means sharing with colleagues a sense of purpose, why this place matters.

Strategy is glorified as leading, but it must be equal part listening – understanding who we are and giving this practical voice.

My first experience of setting an institutional strategy came with *The Griffith Project*, a plan for the University released in 2002, my first year as a Vice Chancellor.

It paid attention to the big concerns for the institution, but also – importantly – to the symbols, those visible projections of our purpose and meaning.

Symbols can matter. They express, better than words in a plan, what we are about. The early Griffith, for example, saw itself as a challenger, the original home of environmental studies and Asian knowledge, a radical Brisbane alternative to the staid conservatism of the University of Queensland and the applied focus of what was then QIT, now Queensland University of Technology.

Yet Griffith began life with a traditional shield and iconography, as though suffering a medieval hangover. So

alongside the new strategic plan here was an opportunity to capture the spirit of the place, by commissioning young artists to design something contemporary and confronting, using the boldest shades of red available. If you are going to be red, be very red.

Strategy means doing something different – and sharing that with the world. You must do, not show – programs that matter, curriculum that challenges, a chance for students to change the world. And you have to find symbols that tell your audience why this matters. We found one such at Griffith in the legendary musical artist Ray Charles <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9la7JpfMHv8>.

Ray helped remind the community – and staff – that a university is more than the professors, more than the students. It is a civic institution with a mission that lasts longer, and matters more, than anyone currently on campus. We are just here for a short time in a university that will still be young when we are old. A vice-chancellor with a strategy to express that vision might, just, earn their keep.

2

GOVERNMENT IS NOT SALVATION

Strategy is made more challenging by frequently changing Commonwealth policy. When policy shifts it reveals that our organisational decisions do not rest on reliable foundations.

Government can, at times, be our friend but it is never our salvation. Keeping our distance, maintaining independence, is always wise.

I tried to count the higher education ministers during my 17 years as a vice-

chancellor. It is surprisingly hard to do. The portfolio name changes often, as research or science or employment slide in and out of the frame.

Staying with just primary higher education responsibilities, I served with Ministers Brendan Nelson, Julie Bishop, Julia Gillard, Chris Evans, Craig Emerson, Simon Crean, Chris Bowen, Bill Shorten, Christopher Pyne, Simon Birmingham and now Dan Tehan – 11 in all, each with their own priorities, serving on average 18 months in the portfolio.

Almost all worked hard in the portfolio, and a handful made important contributions.

I mention two. Brendan Nelson and Julia Gillard each brought original thinking and tested these through influential expert review of key issues. As Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (but not Education) Senator Kim Carr made farsighted steps toward full costing of research. Alas his innovations were quickly overturned by subsequent ministers.

For some politicians, higher education is an unwelcome portfolio, filled with ungrateful vice-chancellors, protesting students, pointless trivial controversies, and little opportunity to shine. Higher education ministers can become increasingly testy, worried their career is sinking without trace amid the quagmire of this portfolio.

But whether caring or inattentive, good or bad, ministers move on quickly, usually leaving unfinished business, reviews that are never implemented, difficult issues passed on to an unwitting successor.

A brief stay in the ministerial office is never enough time to create a stable, workable

policy framework for higher education. So universities must never pin their hopes on transient political masters.

It is why I have long advocated a post-school education commission, to encourage long-term policy stability. And it is why I was a reluctant but public supporter of the deregulation proposed by Christopher Pyne. After cuts to funding imposed by both sides of politics, Minister Pyne at least offered a trade: yet more cuts but also greater control over our own fees. Less than ideal, better than the alternatives then on offer.

But it turned out the fixer could not fix the Senate. The deregulation moment passed, never to return. And, of course, we got the cuts anyway. So yes to working with government whenever possible, but institutional autonomy is crucial. In good moments ministers can be our friend, but only we can take responsibility for our own future.

3

IT AIN'T PERSONAL

Leadership has practical requirements,

but there is also necessary symbolism. Getting frocked up in a black and silver gown, sitting at high table, solemn occasions – these are obligatory parts of human commerce. Someone has to fill the robes, preside, praise, provide a sense of continuity in a university community.

In truth, it little matters who walks across the stage, as long as someone does. As so often, the novelist David Malouf captures this impersonal fulfilling of office that is part of any ceremonial role, including a Vice Chancellor. In his brilliant 2009 novel *Ransom*, Malouf channels the King of Troy, Priam, reflecting on his duties:

My role was to hold myself apart in ceremonial stillness and let others be my arm, my fist ... To be seen as a man like other men – human as we are, all of

us – would have suggested that I was impermanent and weak. Better to stand still and keep silent, so that when old age came upon me, as it has at last, the world would not see how shaky my grip has become, and how cracked and thin my voice.

A Vice Chancellor is not a monarch, but she is a symbol for the institution, and sometimes must be a ceremonial figurehead.



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The job also requires a measure of elegant acting. David Derham was a long-serving and very successful Vice Chancellor at the University of Melbourne. He was also a smoker, and eventually this led to emphysema. As public speaking became more and more difficult, Professor Derham

wrote the Vice Chancellor out of active roles in university ceremonies. He would sit and preside, fixed and permanent, apparently unchanging. By the time he retired in 1982, vice-chancellorial silence at public ceremonies had become the tradition at Melbourne. So it remains.

Such random customs become in time the character of a place. Much we do as a Vice Chancellor is not personal but necessary for the life of the institution. This can be harmless, like sitting wordless in splendid

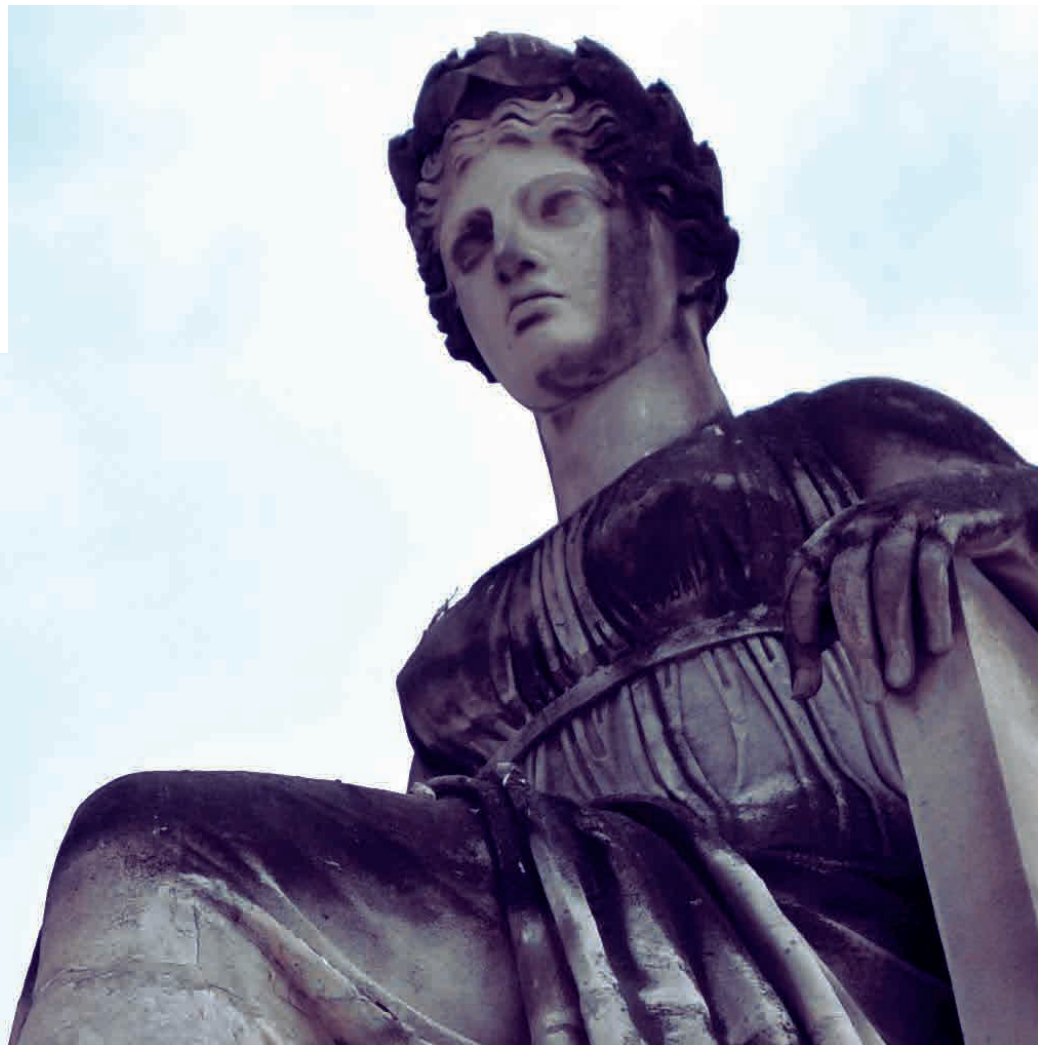
gowns at long graduation ceremonies. It can be aggravating, when abuse directed against the university is made personal.

It means the Vice Chancellor earns praise she does not deserve, and criticism that is misdirected and unfair. You can even end up, as I did, a character in a stage musical put on by students to mock the administration.

Flattering or annoying, tedious or engrossing, you must remember it is

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not personal. You are, for a time, the figurehead. Someone has to be, and someone will be again when you go.

So don't take it personally. Vice Chancellors are not absolute rulers, but the desire for a court and the customs of courtiers, a sense all revolves around some central personage, runs deep in our culture.

When this attention ends, as it must, remember it was never about you.

4

NEVER LISTEN TO PRAISE OR GOSSIP

Which brings us to the key piece of personal advice I would share. Praise is kryptonite. Gossip is equally undermining.

Both must be avoided.

When a colleague tells you there is some rumour about yourself you really need to know, the only acceptable answer is “no I don't really need to know. Do not tell me.”

There is a whole narrative out there about every one of us. You can't influence it. You can't answer whatever wild inaccuracies people say about you. So make it your business never to know.

You're the vice-chancellor. You must keep your views about others hidden. You must treat everyone equally, professionally. You can never trade in gossip.

Rather, you have reached that point in a career when your job is encourage and praise others, to ensure credit falls where

it belongs, to recognise and celebrate the work of colleagues. You are there for everyone else, not for yourself.

You can never trade in rumour, in speculation, in innuendo. You are the ceremonial head of an institution, the fixed and unchanging point of authority.

In becoming leader you forfeit the right to be one of the crowd. You must leave every function early so that others can relax. You must endure people telling you things you already know, show patience amid tedium, grace when criticised. You distribute praise but can accept none in response.

This is what people mean by the loneliness of command. It is a necessary price for the role you sought so eagerly.

5

IT DOESN'T LAST LONG – TREASURE, ENJOY, AND LEAVE

One cold night in August 2015, I stood with hundreds of other people in the Old Quad at the University of Melbourne. Under the direction of the brilliant Lara McKay we were filming an ambitious cinema advertisement. Our aim: to make human the intellectual aspiration of the university to be a place where ideas collide.

Alongside the production crew were students from Melbourne's Faculty of Fine Arts and Music and many of my colleagues in senior management, keen to be involved.

Our aim: to present in three dimensions the strategy guiding the university – the commitment to a triple helix of research, education and engagement, the idea that in a great institution disciplines collide, so one branch of knowledge influences others.

How to convey this abstraction at the heart of the university mission? We made a minute-long film: <https://vimeo.com/140389075>. It took most of the night to film. The advertisement went on to win a string of international awards. It allowed Melbourne to pivot from explaining the Melbourne Model to showing how our model of education imagines new possibilities for students and society.

The advertisement encapsulated the next stage in the strategy. Like most university advertising it was as much aimed at our own staff as at the world.

What an extraordinary privilege to be part of this moment.

These jobs are fun. They provide an

opportunity to work with the best minds, to experiment, to argue a case. To be a Vice Chancellor, anywhere, is to be part of a place that matters. Through skill and hard work you might even make it better.

To be a Vice Chancellor is to stand as one in a long chain of scholarly leaders who cherish ideas, love education, who are passionate about this university, keen to walk it toward a bright future.

For every frustration of the job there are a hundred boundless moments of pleasure: launching a new literary review, winning a medical school, watching talented colleagues develop a new undergraduate curriculum, pitching an ambitious development idea to an American donor, acquiring a new engineering campus so researchers can work alongside industry.

Each moment is shared with others, made possible by the team, celebrated by a community. An important announcement is gratifying. So too is sitting quietly in University House late Friday afternoon with Provost Margaret Sheil, eating chips and discussing the week just finished.

There are few other roles so worth doing, so worth cherishing. This is hard to leave, but leave we all must.

If you have done the job well, there will be talented colleagues ready to step up, people keen to lead in their right. Leaving when the time is right is your last great duty.

All too soon it is time for someone new to convince the university it is better off with a Vice Chancellor, someone else to navigate fickle government, to balance the ceremonial and the active, to praise others, and to enjoy the brief stretch of leadership allocated to any of us.

Clarity in setting a vision. Humility about the role. Invisibility once gone. Leadership is always momentary – a dazzling, brief chance to contribute.

Only one single sentence survives from Sophocles' lost play, *The Loves of Achilles*. This speaks of happiness as an icicle held in the fist of a child, brilliant but fleeting. A pleasure that lasts but an instant.

So too leadership. It is temporary and transitory. But it's more than enough.

At the time of writing Professor Davis was the Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne. A teacher and researcher in public policy, he previously served as Director-General of the Department of Premier and Cabinet in Queensland. His books include The Australian Idea of a University, The Republic of Learning and (as co-author) The Australian Policy Handbook.