



| VIEWPOINT

AUSTRALIA'S UNIQUE INSIGHT FOR CIVIC UNIVERSITIES

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Late one evening in 1844, a merchant and future politician, William Westgarth, was hopelessly lost just north of Melbourne. Drawn to the light of campfires flickering along a creek, he stumbled across a group of local Wurundjeri people. While some “lay asleep, rolled up in their opossum rugs”, others were still awake and “readily pointed out the proper direction” to Melbourne for the

disorientated Westgarth. Ten years later, the foundation stone for the University of Melbourne’s Old Quad was laid near the site of those campfires. Westgarth later reasoned that replacing the ‘native encampment’ with a university was a sign of societal progress. He regarded the University — the height of ‘civilisation’ — as enlightening the ‘primitive colony’, seemingly oblivious to how he personally



benefitted from engaging with Indigenous people and their knowledge.

For too long, Australian universities have assumed a similar mindset to Westgarth, overlooking Indigenous knowledge, ideas and peoples. Margaret Williams-Weir, the University of Melbourne's (and Australia's) first recorded Indigenous graduate, graduated in 1959, an unconscionable 104 years after the University opened its doors. Excluding Indigenous Australia meant universities missed opportunities to discover and share its rich knowledge. Indigenous knowledge still exists, and we can still access it, learn from and about

it. Importantly, including Indigenous knowledge systems, and examining their interaction with other knowledge systems, will enhance universities' core purpose of knowledge creation and dissemination. However, we must reframe how we view civic engagement between universities and Indigenous peoples if we are to learn all they have to teach us.

The theme of the 2019 Engagement Australia conference, *The Role of a Civic University in Australia*, reflects the greater prominence of civic ideals in higher education thinking and practice. The recent Civic University Commission in the United Kingdom explored the growing importance of civic universities to the present and

future of their local communities. As the Commission notes, universities have "been territorially agnostic for many years", ignoring the importance of local context and place. Civic universities are responding to this historic oversight by focusing on the specific, place-based opportunities before them. As the Commission's report argues, the current climate provides an opportunity to rearticulate the role of universities, with civic engagement serving

PHOTO

Glass eel-trap installation: Maree Clarke, *Ancestral Memory 2019* (installation photograph), glass, steel. Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph: Christian Capurro.

a fundamental part of the established university roles of knowledge creation and dissemination.

We should apply this same spirit of understanding and connecting with context to how we consider the current framing of the civic university in Australia. The foundations of our higher education system are firmly British, an extension of the territorial agnosticism that prompted the civic university movement. However, rather than embracing the civic model as a response to these challenges, we should first understand how these civic ideals might serve the needs and opportunities of our context, and in particular, of Indigenous Australia. Universities should build enriching relationships with Indigenous communities that involve deep two-way learning, a notion that extends beyond service, anchor institutions and social accountability.

When it comes to Indigenous knowledge, the framing of a civic university presents three issues. First, the term ‘civic’ originates from Indo-European languages, reinforcing a western civilisation approach to higher education. In framing the role of the university in this way, we

unintentionally exclude other knowledge paradigms, including from Indigenous communities.

Second, as the Commission notes, “A civic university cannot serve everywhere, and that means that someone must fall on the wrong side of the boundary”. In Australia, Indigenous peoples have traditionally

been placed on the wrong side of university boundaries. Merely extending civic boundaries to ensure universities serve more Indigenous Australians could be akin to assimilation, a social process Indigenous populations know only too well.

Third, the Commission report highlights a public desire for universities to “localise their national and international responsibilities.” They feel universities have responsibilities to benefit local students, employers and communities.

The opposite is needed for engagement with Indigenous knowledge. Australian universities can internationalise local Indigenous knowledge by connecting it with established global knowledge systems, including the dynamic global dialogue surrounding Indigenous knowledge systems.

The University of Melbourne’s relationship with Indigenous knowledge thus far is

instructive. At first, our mindset towards Indigenous issues focused on undertaking research on major challenges facing Indigenous peoples and generating solutions to ‘fix’ them from afar. Another approach was to view Indigenous communities as needing our charitable help, and providing the support we determined they needed.

We only started to build enriching relations once we began viewing our relationship with Indigenous peoples as one that involves deep two-way learning. The concept of *bala lili*, from the Yolngu Matha in Arnhem land, northern Australia, beautifully encapsulates our new approach. *Bala lili* means ‘to give and take, listening and understanding’. It refers to the phenomenon where saltwater and freshwater rivers meet, mix, and flow on together. Where these waters combine, they bubble up together to create something exciting, something new.

A transformative model for this two-way learning is on-Country subjects, developed by local Elders, whereby students learn ‘on Country’ about Indigenous perspectives, issues, and ways of being. By engaging with Indigenous communities and their human libraries of knowledge, these partnerships offer bidirectional learning opportunities and create new knowledge, fulfilling the purpose of our university.

The differing context, geography and history of other nations will mean this form of civic relationship with Indigenous peoples may not be relevant to other universities. The responsibilities of a university in London, Johannesburg or Shanghai will depend on the needs, deeds and histories of their *place*. However, the concept of *bala lili* is applicable to



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all. To build enriching relationships with their local communities, universities must view engagement as a two-way process of giving and taking, listening and understanding.

This year, the University of Melbourne re-opened its Old Quad after years of work to restore the building to its original grandeur. The occasion blended high academic procession and a traditional smoking ceremony. The ceremony continued inside the Old Quad, flanked by Maree Clarke's amazing *Ancestral Memory* exhibition. The exhibition features traditional Indigenous eel traps alongside a newly commissioned contemporary glass installation. Highly adaptive creatures that swim between freshwater and saltwater, eels can migrate from Australia to South America and back again. Demonstrating resourcefulness and resilience, they journey beneath the University through stormwater pipes

that were once natural waterways. The eels occasionally surface in ponds on campus, often following heavy rain. Their appearance is a reminder that our land has a history, and knowledge systems, that long precede this institution. The eels also show that something pushed below the surface can re-emerge under the right conditions.

With the eel traps watching on, Vice-Chancellor Duncan Maskell, bedecked in academic regalia, walked in to deliver apposite remarks on behalf of the University. Accompanying him was Professor Sandra Eades, donning the ceremonial possum skin cloak recently gifted to the University. The cloak, made by Mandy Nicholson, a Wurundjeri woman, symbolises connectedness to Country, and to the University. Etched into the cloak is swirling smoke of Wurundjeri fires, blazes that drew Westgarth to the same location 185 years before.

The ceremony concluded, re-opening an Old Quad newly enriched by Indigenous knowledge, culture and custom. Tradition mixing with a resilient and vibrant living culture. An academy adapting. The creation of something exciting, something new.

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PHOTO

VC Duncan Maskell and Professor Sandra Eades: Old Quad ceremonial reopening on Thursday 2 May 2019. Photo: Peter Casamento.



Declining trust in public institutions across western democracies, where evidence-based arguments can run a poor second to appeals to emotion and identity (witness Brexit and the rise of populist leaders).
