



| VIEWPOINT

THE PURPOSE OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A VICE-CHANCELLOR'S PERSPECTIVE

VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT OF UTS, PROFESSOR ATTILA BRUNGS,
INTERVIEWED BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON PIETSCH



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: I imagine being a Vice-Chancellor is one of the more challenging jobs in Australia at the moment.

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS: It's a challenging job. But before I go into the challenges, can I say right at the outset, it is still one of the greatest privileges

anybody can possibly have. I feel the honour on a day-to-day basis. We have thousands of years' history of universities, and our aim is how can we help society through challenges? How can we help society become better places? How can we hold mirrors up to society? How can we do the research that helps people get

out of bed in the morning, cures their cancer, helps their kids get educated? So it is absolutely challenging. But I couldn't start off without saying how keenly I feel and still feel the honour and how proud I am to be part of a community like UTS. In week one, we had 50 academics across the university volunteer their time to work

with government and community groups to tackle the COVID challenges. I have got hundreds of academics at the moment working on programs to try and help our economy recover, to try and create jobs for those who don't have them. So that gets to the heart of what a university is. A university is a public institution. We exist solely for public good. And that's what makes my job, even in these times of challenge, so much more rewarding in that there is something worth fighting for. And then every time you succeed, it doesn't just help your institution. It helps our country.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: You've been very vocal in talking about UTS as a public university. So what does that public mission mean?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS:

The university is a public institution that exists for social good. Regardless of where it gets its funding from, we are enacted under a separate act of Parliament - New South Wales Parliament. We've some very clear goals: that we need to help educate society; we need to provide research to further society; and we have to provide debate, critique, provide rigorous evidence that society can have important discussions society needs to have going forward. So that's what a public institution is.

Now what it means is that everything we do has the long-term best interests of Australia at heart. Sometimes it means we're counter-cyclical. So sometimes it means we are saying things that parts of society or our policymakers don't necessarily agree with, because again - it is unfortunate - many times policymakers are driven into short term electoral cycles, whereas in university, you can say "Hang on, that's fine for the next three months,

but what about the next 5 years, 10 years? Where are we going?" Now, the challenge of the university is that it's embedded in our DNA. We educate people. People go out and make society a better place.

Often (usually when I give my speech at Graduation) people say the biggest impact universities make is through their research, curing cancer and so on. I look around the wonderful faces in the graduation hall and say, "No, no it's you". You're going to go out and solve today's challenges. You're going to go out and design how to make things better for your fellow humans. So one of the things we do - the biggest responsibility we have as a university - is how we construct education in such a way that we can support people going out to do that: to set up the frameworks to get them to think creatively, to get them to think about the big picture, and to get them to think about 'sustainability and the long term.

Something we've done at UTS is to come up with what we call our social impact framework. We try to measure what social benefit we have right across the university and hold everything to account against that, because even in the good times - and these are far from the good times with the university finances - you can't do everything. You have to make a choice. Do I do this education or do I do that? Do I work at this community group or do I support that government policy? To make those choices, you need a framework that comes back to, at its essence, measuring how much broad social impact you can have.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: So how does keeping the long view at the forefront of your mission

intersect with the need to run a business, which is also what universities are? They've got balance sheets. They run on year-to-year accounting cycles. Who pays for all of this?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS: It's paid for in a variety of ways. UTS is roughly a \$1.1 billion organisation, so the joy I have is I've got to run a \$1.1 billion organisation. I don't have to do the things that I would be required to do if I was running an investment bank such as being held to quarterly accounts that earn increasing amounts of money for shareholders. I just have to make sure that I use that \$1.1 billion in the best way possible for society. As a result our KPIs are much broader and our stakeholders are broader. I will use the words of one of my Council members who advised the university's stakeholders are society, its students, the government, our staff. We have a much broader set of stakeholders.

What you need to do is you need to work with those stakeholders. You need to run an organisation that is efficient and effective, but effective at what? I can be as efficient as I like, but if I'm not efficient in the right areas, what's the point? So therefore, we've taken a lot of time at UTS and our new strategies around that to say: "What do we want to achieve?" And then let's make sure we use everything, including our finances, and run our finances as tightly as possible to get to that outcome. And that outcome is a certain set of key societal objectives that we measure and manage in a very concrete way.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: What are those societal objectives that UTS has set?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS:

The first is moving towards a lifetime of learning. That is a big shift in society. And in fact, the post-COVID world will be quite different. But some of the trends that we identified pre-COVID are actually going to happen faster and harder and happen simultaneously - things like the need for a lifetime of learning. People need to learn a lot more all the way through their lives. There needs to be training and retraining. But I think COVID has brought them on faster because we've got a whole lot of people without jobs. How do we help them get the skills they need for the new jobs? Automation will be coming faster as businesses who are under financial pressure try to cut costs. So therefore, how do we reskill people to get new jobs? This lifetime of learning: universities crudely were set up to take wonderful kids from school, give them a great experience of two or three years and then wish them luck for the rest of their careers. That's completely shifted. What I want for UTS and I see the whole sector going towards is how do we support people all the way through their post-secondary education. Someone coming from school is just as much a part of the UTS community as someone who's been out for years, someone who's changing careers 10 years down the track, someone who wants to do something else at the age of 65. All of those are now in the purview of how we need to support society.

It sounds small. That is a huge, huge shift. The whole approach of a university needs to shift to tackle it, but that's what society needs now. We have a strategy called UTS 2027. We figured we had a few years to get there. I think COVID's brought it on a lot

faster. We need to get to that model much quicker than we had in the past. That's one. The second one - this is more linked to UTS - is around innovation. This is particularly for Australia - how are we going to drive jobs growth? Often as a Vice-Chancellor, I feel the need to make sure that we graduate 10,000 wonderful people a year, to make sure that they've got all the skills they need to do whatever they go to. I also keenly feel that we need to create 10,000 new jobs for people to go to at least, if not more. That's why a lot of our strategy is shifted. How do we help create those jobs? We've got UTS student start-ups. We created 318 startups in the last 12 months. That will be helpful. But we're working with the New South Wales Government. How can we make that a thousand a year for the next three years? Each of those companies will employ between 5 and 10 people. That's what we need to change. How do I help those wonderful people graduating every year have the innovation and entrepreneurial skills to create more jobs? So there's a real shift for UTS, because I'm thinking about the economy 5, 10, 15, 20 years out.

We need to drive jobs growth in very different ways than we've driven it before. Where universities often only focus on providing the skills for those jobs, I think it's now incumbent upon us to try to help create that whole ecosystem to drive jobs. The third one is all around how we engage in what I call a broader social justice mission, using the expertise of the universities. To be harsh on me and universities in the past, sometimes if we had this great research, or came up with wonderful theories, we wrote a paper about them. We maybe flicked them to

government and hoped that government would do something about them and then sat back feeling warm and fuzzy that we've helped society. That time is long past. We have to use our knowledge, our existing knowledge, to actually engage with society for two reasons. One - because we've a lot of knowledge that can help society through challenges it's facing. But two - to listen to society in ways we've never listened to before. Unless we listen and engage in a very different way than we've done in the past, we'll be providing solutions to problems no one really cares about, and that is a complete waste of time, money and resources at a period of history when we cannot afford to do that. I think there's a complete shift, particularly in the post-COVID world, on how we engage with society in different ways to solve the problems that they need now.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: These are all enormous changes to the traditional way universities have understood themselves as creating knowledge and delivering education, and then, as you said, sending people out into the world. There's a kind of separation between knowledge generation and society, and the way you've been talking about universities blurs that boundary. Is there a new social contract that is being written for the 21st century between universities, the state and the public?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS: I'd like to say it's a social contract that merely changes the contract that universities have had with society for a long period. In various parts of history, universities engage with societies in different ways for societal needs of that time. I suppose

what I'm arguing and, in particular, I think in a post-COVID world, those needs are radically different. Therefore, we have radically different models of how we engage. It could be a new social contract or could be this age's social contract that the universities have. What doesn't change is that we're public institutions. What doesn't change is that we exist for social good. At one point, universities became quite isolated places and it was fine if you went to university, worked at university, or benefited directly from research at university. That's not good enough anymore. It has to be far more out there in the community as a whole. One of the things that I see with education changing - and universities need to navigate our role in this - is a blurring with this lifetime learning between where people get their education. Very soon people may or may not start with university. They may start with a TAFE, then get some education from the workplace, then get a private provider, then come back and do a micro-credential or masters at university. But they'll go through all of those throughout their learning journey and all of them are complementary. The problem is, there's often been a hierarchy of education. That needs to be blown up. And people have to understand there's different types of education that will suit people at different points in their life. Do you know that Australia's the only OECD country where the businesses are putting less into developing their staff than anyone else and going backwards? I'm not sure that helps our economy get where we need to go, particularly at this point in time.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON PIETSCH: What about the settings

that encourage those businesses to take responsibility for continuing to train their staff throughout a lifetime of development? What are we getting wrong there? Maybe to put the question a different way: what is your vision of what the policy settings should be coming from government around framing what those societal goals are?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS:

I think there are three things that will influence them. First is the government settings. I think the government does need to think through incentives for businesses around how do they build more development training. The second one, to tell you the truth, is just market forces. Those who start doing this well will flourish. Those who don't are going to go out of business. There is a certain brutality in market forces that I think the post COVID world will bring a sharp and pointy stick at.

And then there's the third one - I think there is actually becoming a new social contract between enterprise and society. Think about it through the early part of this century. There was a lot more understanding that government will provide this and businesses are just about making money. If they make as much money as possible, that's good because it trickles to everyone. I think with a lot of businesses, what you're already seeing is they realise their role in society is much broader than that. They've got to engage with the sustainability agenda. They've got to engage with being a positive contribution to society, more than just making money and making employment.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: If you're taking a long-term

horizon, that is a mechanism for change. But arguably, we don't have a long-term horizon when it comes to questions of sustainability and the climate challenge. The events over the summer brought home just how urgent some of these questions are. If COVID hadn't erupted, we might be sitting here talking about the consequences of the bushfires. So what does thinking about climate do to the university's mission?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS: The university tackles sustainability in three ways. The first is, most importantly, how do we embed questions - a question, a curiosity, an understanding of sustainability and its importance in our education? One of the core parts of university is you teach people how to think, how to critique, how to look beyond a Twitter feed. If you get that right, you'll produce people who really can question, who can really critique or understand what's going on. More importantly - and this is for all of our education - understand the importance of taking responsibility and accountability for their actions. I know you may say that takes a long time, but believe me, I have seen people graduate within one year or two years - they've gone out and made a huge difference. So I am more optimistic than you that if you've got 10,000 people who've got the questioning bright minds, know how to critique, know how to find evidence, know how to make change, that'll happen faster than you think.

The second one is around research. We do a lot of research around sustainability. So how do we give society the solutions it needs and how do we help society understand that many of the solutions that they need are here now. There are so many

techniques that we can use that can help our sustainable world that don't require 10 more years' research. They exist now. It's just behavioural change. A big part of our mission is how to make sure people understand the research, the tools. UTS has been driving that as hard as we can.

The third part is - as a university - we have to lead. We have to make some tough decisions. Say, for example, a few years ago it could have been very easy for us to buy more green energy. Great, I'd have felt good about it. The students would have felt good about it. We'd have green energy, which would help the environment. What we did instead was one of our academics in ISF spent a year going through the relatively byzantine practices of buying and selling electricity in the market to find out a way that we could buy power from one particular provider. The reason why that was important is then we could invest in a solar farm in Singleton, in the Hunter Valley. That solar farm, we could give them a pre-contract. They could take the contract to the bank. The bank would give them a loan. And now they've built a solar farm and we bought electricity directly. So that is a systems change. Now, a number of universities and a number of businesses are doing that. We have created a whole industry around very economically-viable solar farms.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: And I suppose it means you're thinking about the university as an entrepreneur in itself in a way. But I did want to ask you what you think the likely changes will be to the way the sector is organised. And I guess there's many potential scenarios that might play out. There's talk of mergers. There's talk of

smaller institutions. If we're having this conversation in 10 years' time, what do you think the higher education sector in Australia will look like?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS:

The most important question you should always ask yourself to start off with, is why? So many of the conversations I've seen around this, there's not been any why. They've been answered before people have asked, "Why the hell would you do that?" And that disappoints me. What's our new social contract? How do we deliver that more effectively? So let's have those conversations first before we go anywhere near "Oh, we need mergers." I mean, every article I've read on that I've gone "Why?" But I've seen so many mergers destroy more value than you could possibly poke a stick at, especially when people don't know why. So if I could answer your question a different way, the 'why's' that I want are: One - We need to have an education that we do very well in Australia, and we've done even better in the past few years of the demand-driven system, which is to make sure we've got equitable access to our entire population for those who need and deserve university education, or TAFE or VET education. That for me is the fundamental why. If we don't get that right, it doesn't matter what structure we are - we've stuffed our country. We're not a big enough country that we can waste resources. We're an incredibly rich country in our people assets. If we can make sure that there's equitable access for all segments of society, that's number one. Two - this new social contract you said, how can we use whatever shape, whatever business model we have to make sure we're delivering what society needs, not

what we think society needs? So if there are bigger or smaller institutions, fine - as long as they have addressed the 'why?' in making the case. My biggest concern in the next little while is if you focus too much on costs, you can take yourself down a path that returns universities to a very elite, small amount of education. A lot of the commentary I've seen in the media at the moment would take Australia to a place where - I'll be quite blunt - the rich upper echelons of society get a great university education. Everyone else gets a poor education and there's very much a schism in our society. Not only do you not need that from an equity point of view, not only do you not need that from an Australian cultural point of view, that destroys economic value. In this post-COVID world, we need all of our resources, our incredible people resources working for our country's prosperity and our national wellbeing.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: What should publics - being industry but also the students you've been talking about - what should they be demanding of universities on the one hand, but also governments on the other who are going to be setting these policy objectives?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS:

One of the big things that I think all of them should be really aware of is how do we create a system that will support them getting their educational needs throughout their whole lives? We do not have enough education capacity in Australia, either through universities, VET, private providers or business. Say my daughter, who's 14 - I just know how much education she's going to need through her life. At the moment, it's not there. What people should be

demanding is how do we create a system such that people can have access to educate, retrain, reskill, upskill throughout their lives so that they can make the best of themselves as well as make an incredibly valued contribution to society. That's what we really need.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: There's really only three kinds of sources of funding for that. There's individuals, there's governments and there's industry. So what's the funding mix that we should be looking towards? What responsibilities do individuals have to pay for that lifetime of retraining? What responsibilities should employers have and where does the government come in?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS:

Unfortunately, I'm going to be very bad at answering. My answer is yes to all of those. But I think the 'yes' changes depending on who you are, perhaps what stage of your life. I can see more government contribution, like schools should be essentially free. But if you're three quarters through your career reskilling, I think you should bear more of the burden. If you're an employer and you've got to do a huge workforce change that's going to make lots of money for shareholders, the employer should bear more of the costs. For me, it's not as simple as which one of those three, because it changes as you go through your lifetime learning journey, and I think we need to get a system that's sophisticated enough to recognise that.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TAMSON

PIETSCH: Attila, what's your vision for the future of higher education in the 21st century?

VICE-CHANCELLOR ATTILA BRUNGS: I am a great optimist. One of the things that I have seen in this COVID period is all of our universities and many of our public institutions respond in a way that you really would have hoped that they did. It's nice to say this in good times, but they have responded in a way to make sure that they look after society. When I've got millions of dollars of financial challenges and we provide a thousand meals a week for kids who can't eat, and we provide research to drive new jobs that we do now to invest more money into it, what I would like to see is that ethos continue that creates - call it your new social contract - where our public institutions are fit for purpose to help our society prosper in the long term.

Professor Attila Brungs is the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Technology Sydney. He has previously held senior positions with CSIRO and McKinsey & Company. Professor Brungs is a Rhodes Scholar with a Doctorate in Inorganic Chemistry from Oxford University and a University Medal in Industrial Chemistry from the University of New South Wales. Some of Professor Brungs' present key appointments include ATN Chair; the NSW Innovation and Productivity Council; the Committee for Sydney Board; and ATSE fellow. His experience includes many distinguished past board and committee memberships, including not-for-profit organisations, in addition to numerous state and federal government and institutional appointments.

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*at UTS. Tamson's research focuses on the history of ideas and the politics of knowledge in international contexts. She has a particular interest in higher education. Tamson is the author of *Empire of Scholars: universities networks and the British academic world, 1850-1939* (Manchester, 2013) and the co-editor of *The Transnational Politics of Higher Education* (Routledge, 2016). Tamson is currently writing a book about the 1926 world-cruise of the "Floating University" as well as leading an ARC project on expertise in interwar Australia. She is the Director of the UTS audio unit, Impact Studios, and host of the History Lab podcast.*

The audio recording of this interview can be found at www.engagementaustralia.com.au.