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Article

Engagement matters in a post-pandemic world

Professor John Dewar AO



Why should we care about universities? I've been pondering this question a lot recently as universities have struggled to cope with significant revenue downturns and the challenges of moving to a more digital way of doing things.

What strikes me now is the mismatch between what I think is the supreme importance of universities in a post-pandemic world on the one hand, and a sense of ambivalence in some quarters about the severity of challenges universities are facing as a direct consequence of the pandemic. What is causing this? And what can universities do about it?

The importance of universities to our national prosperity and wellbeing cannot be overstated. In its 2021 Intergenerational Report, the Treasury identified the two challenges facing the Australian economy as skills shortages and improving productivity. Universities will be critical to addressing both.

According to the National Skills Commission, almost two in three jobs that will be created in the Australian economy over the next five years will require a bachelor's level degree or higher qualification¹; and universities have the capacity to contribute significantly to lifting national productivity through innovation. For instance, if an extra one per cent was invested in university research now, our GDP would grow by \$2.4 billion annually.²

The lasting effects of the pandemic on

the economy and society are yet to fully unfold, but we can be certain that it will intensify the importance of reskilling or upskilling our workforce to address the decline in some areas of our economy and turbocharge growth in others; and increase productivity through genuine innovation rather than relying heavily on skilled migration and increased labour force participation.

So why do universities sometimes struggle to gain community support sufficient to mobilise governments to provide more assistance to the sector to achieve these outcomes? After all, governments (of all persuasions) are more likely to support something if they perceive their electors care about it.

There are many possible reasons for this. Australian universities have grown to be vast enterprises employing thousands of staff with revenues

sometimes running into the billions of dollars. Some universities would, if listed on the ASX, rival many of Australia's best-known corporates in scale, assets and revenue. They are global institutions with deep connections to universities, industries, and governments around the world, attracting billions of dollars in 'export' revenue. This can provoke suspicion and jealousy from outsiders who question universities' loyalty to serving a national or local interest (however defined). The sector's tendency to spawn progressive social movements can also attract the ire of social conservatives; while the sheer scale of universities as employers attracts criticism from the left for practices such as workforce casualisation.

In hard times, such as the past two years, it is evident that universities need to be louder and clearer about the value they add to their communities; and that when things get tough, we discover who our friends really are (or not).

So, what can we do about it? I think a first step is to reframe the purpose of

universities to embrace much more clearly the 'public interest' as a more central feature of our mission. We are public institutions and we should wear that badge proudly. As a student once put it to me, universities should shift from aiming (as so many do) to be 'world class' to instead aiming to be 'for the world', or for the public good. That means for the good of the local communities we work within as much as it does about the community at large. This is the shift from 'good at' to 'good for' that Chris Brink has talked about. Closer engagement with students, industry, employers and communities is the key enabler of this shift.

This thinking finds an echo in the work of the University of Lincoln's 21st Century Lab, which has argued the case for the 'permeable' university. This model removes the centuries old barriers erected between universities, society, and the real-world economy so universities can respond to the needs of their communities more effectively.



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1 National Skills Commission 2021, Employment Outlook to November 2025. Available from the Labour Market Information Portal: <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP%2FGainInsights%2FEmploymentProjections>

2 Deloitte Access Economics report 2020, The importance of universities to Australia's prosperity.





It also corresponds with the work of Ronald Barnett, who has argued the case for the 'ecological university' or the 'university for others' – one that is outward looking, deeply connected to

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industry and the communities around it, and committed to serving the needs of its students. This matches with the case set out by Michael Crow and William Dabars in their book *The Fifth Wave: The Evolution of American Higher Education*, which argues the case for a new class of large-scale public university, the 'fifth generation university'. These are Universities that integrate 'broad accessibility to world class knowledge production with societal impact' and accelerate social change.

Public good, social impact, accessibility, permeability – these are the hallmarks of a post-pandemic university, and one that will help to remind Australian communities and governments why universities matter so much, and why they are worth supporting. This will play out through closer engagement with employers, to improve the employability of our graduates; with industry and government to ensure the greater impact of our research; and with local communities to promote social mobility and community resilience.

Some will argue this represents a deviation from the traditional purpose of a university to create and generate ideas and knowledge for their own sake, and therefore a fundamental perversion of the university idea. I don't think it is a zero-sum equation or a binary choice between pursuit of knowledge on the one hand and engagement, application, and impact on the other. They are mutually reinforcing activities, which could be more sharply reflected in our respective missions. Doing so will help us make a strong case for why universities should be highly valued and strongly supported as a driver of Australia's prosperity and wellbeing now and into the post-pandemic future.

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