

VC's View Point:

Reimagining the Public role of Universities

Professor Barney Glover AO FTSE FRSN



The Australian Universities Accord reform process is an all too rare opportunity to collectively re-imagine the public role of universities. As a member of the Accord panel, I have been struck by the clarity of vision of what the function of a university is in society. The wholistic review of education that Australia is currently engaged with, from early childhood through to higher education, is a chance to catalyse

generational change and transformation.

We are living through a time of considerable disruption. New forms of civic engagement – digital and actual – are challenging traditional principles and structures. It is an ideal time for universities to reassert and, to an extent, reconceive their responsibilities as civic institutions committed to social good.

The focus on social good guides the empowerment of students, the impact of research, and how universities work with the many communities they serve. The cliché of the ivory tower no longer fits the purpose of a university, particularly in a country like Australia where campuses are increasingly porous, and university acts set out clear obligations to the communities universities are embedded within.

Social responsibility is emerging as a core and equal part of the mission of universities. To better ensure Australia will reach its full potential both economically and culturally, universities must make unconditional commitments to it.

Former vice-president at King's College London, Jonathan Grant argues the commitment to social responsibility is low within higher education, both historically and today. However, his analysis of the top 71 universities in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2018, points to an increase of both conditional and unconditional commitments of social responsibility from founding to current mission statements.

The Australian Universities Accord Interim report reinforces the need of unconditional commitment of social



responsibility. The report argues the need to better recognise and resource community engagement to enable the important work of being anchor institutions.

This is the case at Western Sydney University, where service and engagement are interwoven throughout its Parliamentary Act. The university-wide approach to community engagement reflects the idea that universities have a broader societal role beyond traditional academic functions.

Western Sydney University, with its campus network spanning the major urban centres of its region, speaks to the importance of working with communities on addressing opportunities and challenges. The region, with its growing population, transition in industry and central business district revitalisations, is a complex space of potential and need.

Individuals within the region are among the nation's most skilled, exceeding the national average. A 2022 Centre for Western Sydney report revealed 27.2 per cent of the region's residents hold a degree, compared to 26.3 per cent nationally. This report is a story of transformation, but also highlights the areas of need that civic institutions

– chiefly, universities – must work to understand and address.

Through engagement, purposeful partnerships and expertise, Western Sydney University has drawn the attention of policy makers to longstanding inequities the pandemic laid bare; the pockets of profound

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income and equity disparity. Despite good progress, Western Sydney residents have not reached the same level of income attainment as the rest of Greater Sydney. There is a higher representation of low income households as well as the highest number of women providing unpaid care than the rest of Sydney. The vulnerabilities of the region are visible through infrastructure needs, including digital inclusion.

Western Sydney University's campus locations make visible the social goods that higher education provides. This campus network reaches into the communities of the region, where the need of social responsibility and community engagement are clear.

Understanding the local through community engagement allows

for co-created initiatives, such as the University's recently announced, Fairfield Connect. This hub is being designed with the Fairfield community will provide opportunities for job skilling, pathway opportunities, facility use and opportunities for SMEs through the university's Launch Pad technology business incubation program.

The impact of Fairfield Connect will be gauged through continued engagement and consultation, particularly in a space where there are high rates of unemployment, humanitarian migration, and a disproportionate representation in the lower income bands. Formalising the role that universities play as anchors as well as capturing the work that they do and how to evaluate it are crucial next steps.

Place-based compacts between universities and the communities they serve is one potential step forward.

The compacts would provide a mechanism to evidence a university's commitment of being an anchor institution. This approach, with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, introduced to Australia in 2022, provides universities with an opportunity to undertake a rigorous and independent review of their investment and commitment to community engagement. Combined, they demonstrate an accountability of our social responsibility.

It may seem obvious, but now more than ever, university engagement needs to be a two-way street. Even with the best intentions, it hasn't always been the case. Truly civic institutions are those that do social good *with*, and not *for*, the communities that simultaneously shape, and are shaped by the engagement. Universities are ideally placed to make that a reality in the decades ahead.

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Professor Barney Glover AO assumed his position as Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University in January 2014.

His career includes significant expertise at the most senior levels of university management as well as demonstrable leadership across the higher education sector. This currently includes as Convenor of the NSW Vice-Chancellor's Committee, Chair of the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching Working Group, Panel Member of the Australian Universities Accord, and the Australia-based Patron of the Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM).

Professor Glover is an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO), a Fellow of the Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE), and a Member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors (MAICD).



