

VC's View Point:

A University's Place in Thriving Communities

Professor Zlatko Skrbis



I was heartened to read the Accord interim report. The panel, supported by feedback from Australian universities has given a great deal of thought to how the sector can advance in the next three decades. There is a clear intention to sharpen the focus of Australian universities towards the social and economic development of Australia and to support the prosperity of our nation. There is a strong

indication that we may end up with the policy and incentive structures which will help strengthen the university system and help create more impactful universities.

Of particular interest was the report's focus on widening access to universities. Australian workforce trends and projections identify that a university education will be critical for job creation, employment and national prosperity. Research shows that improving access for those who have traditionally experienced barriers to higher education is a worthy 'nation building' pursuit. We should never take the transformational power of higher education for granted. I applaud the

interim report's recommendation to extend demand-driven funding for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, regardless of geographic origin. This was a recommendation we had supported in ACU's submission to the Accord discussion paper. If this comes to fruition, it will be an exciting development for the sector. It's also timely for ACU as we embark on establishing our first Pro Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous to further the work of our First People's directorate.

ACU is currently finalising an important piece of work on envisioning its own future: the 10-year strategic plan or 'Vision 2033' as it has become known. Vision 2033 will direct the university to enable flourishing lives, foster thriving communities, and build ethical futures. It sets out to deliver on our mission statement: commitment to the

pursuit of knowledge, the dignity of the human person, and the common good. "Engaged communities" is one of the four success indices that will help us achieve our strategic ambitions. Serving in solidarity by "thinking and acting in terms of community" (Pope Francis,

community engagement should be appropriately recognised and resourced. As a mission-focused university, this is something we do already. Consistently, our recommendation to the Accord panel was that the Commonwealth should support base funding for

there is appropriate respect, reciprocity, and subsidiarity with our community partners. Through approaches that

“*Universities that can partner effectively and honour the knowledge, contributions, and perspectives of those they work with, will enrich their own research, teaching, and outreach programs to optimise their impact for the benefit of society.*”

Fratelli Tutti, 2020) and engaging in authentic and reciprocal partnerships will be key to realising our vision.

Effective community engagement is also implicated in the Accord interim report as a means to augment the impact of core university activities (i.e., teaching, research, and service). I was thrilled to read the 'Serving our Communities' section of the interim report which recognises that

university-community engagement.

At ACU, community engagement is a critical means by which we activate our mission and affirm our Catholic identity. Our mission necessitates striving for the common good and the betterment of society. The principles of Catholic Social Teaching that underpin our mission are consistent with engaged approaches to teaching, research, and outreach. That is, approaches where

honour the knowledge and perspectives of all partners, meaningful knowledge exchange can occur for the benefit of the university and the communities it serves.

ACU has a broad commitment to community engagement. In our curriculum, almost 4000 students



per year participate in community engagement as part of a discipline-specific community engagement unit

change makers. In the research space, the Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU) furthers co-led and co-

Prominent and long-running examples include the Solomon Islands Teacher Education Immersion program (winner



of study. These experiences help shape the attributes that are the hallmarks of an ACU graduate: a person who benefits from an education that extends beyond their personal benefit, and where a 'broader' professional and personal sense of purpose is encouraged. Such an education develops tomorrow's

designed research with our not-for-profit community partners that is both mutually beneficial and impactful. ACU also has a broad suite of community partnerships domestically and internationally that work to transform society and enrich the academic and intellectual life of our staff and students.

of the Uniservitate Regional Award for Catholic Service-Learning in Higher Education), the iPLAY program which in partnership with the NSW Department of Education has enhanced the capacity of over 3000 primary school teachers to teach physical education across more than 200 schools, and the Clemente

program, empowering community members with educational barriers to grow through the transformational power of liberal arts education. The practice of community engagement is supported by ACU Engagement, a centralised unit specifically designed to further the institution's capacity for this work. ACU Engagement has a presence at each of our seven campuses nationally.

Community engagement will be critical to ACU delivering on the ambitions of Vision 2033 and through this work support the ambitions of the Universities Accord. To advance this work will require reflecting on our practice and seeking to continually improve. In our response to the Accord discussion paper, ACU highlighted the Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification as a means to support the wider institutionalisation of community-engaged practices. It was great to see the interim report identify that "classification measures that aim to increase community engagement efforts should be considered" (p.97). Carnegie is ACU's preferred framework given its consideration of the approach, purpose, outcomes, and impacts of university-community engagement. The Carnegie classification serves as a means for our institutions to strive for best practice in community engagement that leads to truly impactful and

mutually beneficial outcomes. This of course requires the appropriate institutional enablers, and at ACU we are 'leaning in' to a journey of continual reflection and improvement.

A university's place in a thriving community should be that of an active and engaged collaborator, who through authentic partnerships can serve in solidarity with other community institutions. Universities that can partner effectively and honour the knowledge, contributions, and perspectives of those they work with, will enrich their own research, teaching, and outreach programs to optimise their impact for the benefit of society. Further, university-community partnerships with these qualities will be more enduring, adaptable, and transformational. The Carnegie classification positions universities as co-creators of knowledge as opposed to privileged disseminators of knowledge. The quality and authenticity of our partnerships is a key measure of our success but also the key pathway allowing us to support the thriving of our communities.



Professor Zlatko Skrbis
Vice-Chancellor and President,
Australian Catholic University

Professor Zlatko Skrbis is the Vice-Chancellor and President of Australian Catholic University (ACU). He is also President of the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities (SACRU). Professor Skrbis holds a PhD in sociology and maintains an internationally recognised research profile. He has made significant contributions in the areas of migration, social theory, and life-course studies. As Vice-Chancellor and President of ACU, he is working to ensure that the university is globally recognised as a future-focused and impact driven institution that improves the lives of others through excellence in education, research, and service.

