

Who or What Guides a University in 2018?

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Thank you for that kind introduction and can I say what a great pleasure and honour it is to have been invited to give this lecture. It is vitally important that we continue to enquire about the role of and leadership of universities and this conference is an important addition to that debate. It is, therefore, intellectually attractive to be here. However, I also lived in Sydney as a practising medic from 1978 to 1980 and actually applied for a job with student health at this very university. I was not appointed, and my life might have been very different if I had been. I loved my time in Australia and especially in this great city, so it is a particular pleasure to be back here – a very different place, might I say, than the Sydney I found in 1978.

The via Zamboni in Bologna is the main street of Bologna University, the oldest in Europe. I was walking down it recently and there was the usual site of all the students milling around – talking and discussing. It struck me that the sight would have been much the same four or five hundred years ago although the clothes would have been different and there would have been little gender diversity. In essence, universities of today continue to what they were doing

centuries ago – teaching students and advancing scholarship. Many people say this exemplifies their conservatism

I would argue this exemplifies conservation not conservatism. There is a phenomenon in evolutionary biology called conservation. This describes that the sequence of a gene remains essentially unchanged over generations and between species because that gene is so vital to the continuance of the species that mutations, an essential part of genetic variability, render the organism dead or unable to reproduce. It is not too much of an extrapolation to say that the similarity of a university's functions over centuries is also an example of this conservation. In other words, the continuance of universities activities in a relatively unchanged manner is essential to the continued health of our society.

We have a great local example of this. The motto of Sydney University is *Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato* which literally translated means “The constellation has changed, the disposition remains the same” or more broadly that the traditions of the northern universities will guide Sydney university even under a southern sky.

However what changes is the environment of the external society and the values and cultures of the individuals who study and work in our universities. That is what I want to explore in this talk. I tried to come up with a more sophisticated title that the "Who and the What" but stuck with it because we can all understand the Who, and I will explore that later but there is also definitely a What and I now want to explore what I mean by that and the influence it has on our universities today. I am aiming to put these observations to the conference as a background against which further discussions can take place. I have been asked to speak for about 30 minutes and there will then be time for questions and observations.

Much of what I will say covers all universities but for the sake of clarity I will be specifically considering universities like Sydney and Bristol – places with relatively long histories, with particular historical governance and which combine education and able student body with substantial research.

By the What, I mean those variables which are not personal to the university or its human leadership. Even a cursory analysis could name many such variables, but I want to explore three:

The desire of society to participate in universities

Their economic impact

The social, political and cultural environment in which universities exist

Let's start with the desire of society to participate in universities. I went to university in 1971 – a privilege extended to about 8.4% of the relevant population. Depending who you believe, around 50% of 18 to 30-year olds now attend university in the UK. Furthermore, the number of individuals study for a higher degree in 1971 was 20,000 and that had risen to 440,000 in 2016. In total there are about 2.3 million individuals being educated in UK universities. In 1971 you could become a lawyer, an accountant, a paramedic of various sorts, a teacher, a banker without having to take a degree – you can't do that now.

So, in 1971, being a student at university was very much a minority sport and you could progress in life perfectly well without going anywhere near such an institution. If universities wanted to just be places for a small number of people to pursue intellectual ambitions – well, so be it. Now multiple millions of people participate in them and with great influence on them personally. Universities

owe duties to those people and in reverse those people carry expectations of universities which we cannot ignore particularly if we are giving them a personal financial burden. Thus, the increased participation of our citizens in universities, the impact such participation has on their lives means that this is a powerful influence of the behaviours of universities.

The second “what” is the economic impact of our universities. In 1960 Bristol was a city whose main industries were aerospace, heavy engineering and the tobacco and chocolate factories typified by the Wills and Fry families. The University was tiny and occupied a small amount of land in Clifton. It was not engaged with the city and really didn’t need to be.

Fast forward to 2018. The University of Bristol is now the biggest independent employer in the city. It directly and indirectly creates 12000 jobs. Each student it brings to Bristol, and the majority come from outside Bristol, spends about £12000 in the city. It is calculated that the two universities in Bristol bring an additional annual economic impact of about £2 billion

In very big cities like London one can joke that closure of a single university, for example UCL, would simply produce a property opportunity in Bloomsbury. That

is most certainly not true in large provincial cities. If the University of Bristol closed it is not too far-fetched to say that Bristol city would close. I remember visiting the University of Teesside in Middlesbrough. It was the only institution building anything in that large town and bigger conurbation in the Tees Valley. The future success of most of our cities and large towns is inextricably linked with the success of their universities and vice-versa. Such interdependency and such economic importance are another powerful driver of how a university must act in the 21st century.

My final “what” is the socio-cultural and political environment in which the university finds itself. These environments are very powerful forces in influencing the behaviour of universities. Consider the differences between how the big state universities behave in the United States compared to their private counterparts. They both teach and research yet because they are in different environments with very different stakeholders, they operate very differently.

Again, there are myriad variables in these environments, but I would like to highlight the following: the increased importance of education, more consumerist individuals, national importance of universities to politicians and finally the rise and rise of accountability.

“Education, education, education” was Tony Blair’s famous quote about his priorities as he campaigned for office in 1997. I don’t have to tell this audience about the transformative power of education, but this has now become centre stage in public discourse. Access to education, its quality, its quality assurance and its efficient delivery have all become prominent issues. The benefits of higher education place it right at the centre of this discourse and also scrutiny

We have all become more consumerist. It is, of course, a reflection of many things including the diminished importance of the collective and more atomisation of society and I suppose we now have so much more to consume. Students are no different from the rest of us and it is hypocritical of university staff, most of whom will behave in a powerfully consumerist way elsewhere, to complain about our students behaving in a similar manner with their universities.

My next issue is the importance that national politicians attach now to universities. The reasons for this have already been stated and if our representatives constantly remind politicians that HE in the UK contributes about £70 billion to a GDP of £1.6 trillion and that we are supplying the

workforce of the future, we can't be surprised when politicians, as is their natural behaviour, want to influence the activities of universities.

In our system of democratic government, it is perfectly reasonable that we should expect our government to have policies about something as important to the nation as HE. In fact, as a voter, I would expect them to fulfil this duty. It is reasonable for government to ask universities to shape themselves to the needs of the nation. To ask them to ensure access for all, to create more engineers when there is already a deficit of 50000 such professionals in the UK, to ensure that their students are prepared for the modern workplace. What is not reasonable is for politicians to interfere in the operation of a single university or to threaten their autonomy.

Let's be clear – government has always sought to influence universities. In the past, they could do it by simply manipulating funding streams. I accessed the Financial Statements for Bristol for 1974. They were really quite simple – Government Grant £8.6 million, expenditure £8.6 million. If politicians wanted universities to do something, they simply created a funding stream to incentivise them. All capital spending came through the University Grants Committee – if you wanted a new building, you had to persuade them, and they certainly had a

view on who should get such buildings and who should not. Often these decisions were made by unaccountable men in private.

Of course, in the UK such funding now no longer exists. When I left Bristol, it was receiving about 15% of its income as a government grant. How do politicians then influence universities – well, of course, by regulation which has exploded over the last 15 years in the UK. I shall analyse this a little later when I address accountability.

What does not happen in the UK is a politician directly interfering in the operation of a single university. I have worked in two national sectors the NHS and universities. The NHS was rife with direct intervention by both local and national politicians. No politician ever intervened directly with me when I was Vice-Chancellor or as President of UUK and I never heard another colleague describe such an intervention.

In fact, in the UK, clever Ministers know that the autonomy of universities is what leads to their creativity and to threaten that is counterproductive. The European Universities Association did a study on university autonomy throughout the EU and showed that the UK had the most autonomous system

and unsurprisingly to this audience, thus the most successful system. I cannot comment about the Australian situation. Such autonomy frustrates Ministers and Westminster and Whitehall abound with stories of universities not doing what government wants of them, but they are canny enough to know that this particular hornets' nest is best left undisturbed.

We have not seen the direct intervention in grant allocation by politicians recently reported here in Australia. Our politicians have stuck with the Haldane Principle that researchers make the decision about grant allocation not politicians. In fact, I can see no mechanism where a politician could intervene; there is no process for this.

But what has changed is accountability and regulation. There can be no doubt that the zeitgeist is accountability. We expect it in all other aspects of life which I know only too well as a medic. We cannot expect to take our citizens' hard-earned money and then not to show that we have taken their needs into account in our future plans and that we have spent their money appropriately. I can find no university that doesn't take taxpayers' money. Even the Ivy League universities take substantial federal and state income – around 25% of total income.

But the combination of this increased accountability in society with the increased regulation that I described earlier has produced an almost overwhelming burden of administration. There are so many examples of this and I shall choose One – the Research Excellence Framework or REF as it is known. The estimated cost of this exercise is about £250 million, and it completely dominates and distorts university strategic planning as well as precipitating significant personnel issues. It is said to be worth these difficulties because it has improved research in the UK. I can find no shred of evidence that the REF itself has improved research quality – such improvement could be easily explained by the increased selectivity of funding that has been driven by increased competition for grants, the expense of scientific research including the provision of facilities and the access to specialised equipment. We now also have a Teaching Excellence Framework and we are going to get a Knowledge Exchange Framework. There is no doubt that UK universities are swamped with fulfilling accountabilities and regulations.

So, there are plenty of whats that lead a university and I have highlighted increased participation in universities, their economic impact and the social, cultural and political climate in which they exist.

So, if those are some of the whats that lead a university – who are the whos who should lead a university. Again, for the purposes of tis talk, I am going to use a traditional university as my exemplar mainly because it the UK the traditions and governance of post-92 universities are very different.

To my mind, the first question that needs addressing is not where the tension lies between consensual leadership and a more dirigiste style but whether a university needs a head whoever that may be. When I was trying to think my way into what was my role as I started at Bristol, I decided one analysis would be to speculate on what would happen if the Vice-Chancellor was run over by a bus and the university simply decided not to replace him or her. Frankly for the first year to 18 months nobody would really notice any difference. However, over time the university would become less sure what its place in the world was and how its future will be shaped in this current world. The senior team would be unsure who was the final arbiter. It would be unsure who was presenting its best interest and individuals from outside would be unsure how or with whom they engage.

So there does seem to be role for someone to be the locus around who strategic leadership circles. For me the key question is how that leadership is exercised and I intend to address that later. There also needs to be someone who close leads a senior team, someone who represents the university on all fronts and finally someone who brings the external dimensions of the world in general and more particularly higher education in particular back into the university.

There are also two more practical reasons why a university needs a leader. The first is someone needs to be accountable and secondly, at different times someone will just need to be in charge. I have already discussed the accountabilities that society expects us to fulfil and that they are unavoidable. Someone needs to operate those accountabilities.

The converse of that is that someone has to be in charge. I know it's facile to say this, but you can't be discussing who is the overall leader when you have a four tender fire consuming two floors of your Department of Chemistry. We used to rehearse such events all hell is let loose when you get the building back and someone has to be in charge of that. I would argue that those two responsibilities alone mean that there has to be a boss.

Perhaps we get to the heart of the matter now. The issue isn't whether someone has to be the boss and lead and manage those external drivers that I have already mentioned. The key question is how that leadership should be exercised.

I have always argued that for universities like Sydney and Bristol, the best model of leadership is consensual. Many leadership manuals argue that consensual leadership is the best model always although how that plays out in a night patrol in enemy territory or in an operating theatre is a bit beyond me. However, I am clear that universities work best if the staff feel included and listened to. I like to make this analysis around the concept of duties rather than rights. The leader has a duty to the academic staff, the professional staff and the students to listen to them and to engage their opinions around important decision making. Actually, it is much more than a duty, it is an excellent way of getting input from very talented people into the decision-making process. Furthermore, if there is a majority consensual decision it draws individuals into accepting the consequences of such decision making. You can hardly back away from a decision with which you explicitly agreed, if things go wrong.

However, the staff and students also have duties. They have a duty to accept that this is a collective process and if the majority agree with it, then they must go along even if they disagree. Finally, the demonization amongst some members of the academy and the media of university leaders as incompetent hardly helps consensual decision making. Maybe it's all just part of the game but the university leaders I know get out of bed in the morning with the intent of doing what's best for their university and staff and students. There is a duty of upward leadership.

The tensions in universities tend to occur when there is no consensus or when really hard things have to be done. This is when a leader may have to employ a finalising decision. I always used to imagine that I had a tank beside me called "political capital" and that it was a good idea to keep that as full as possible. Every time I had to force a decision, I would imagine the level in that tank dropping and that if I did that too often there would be nothing left and either non-one would pay attention the next time round or I would be on my way out. The best way of ensuring that the levels stayed up was to engender trust and that happens by being consistent, fair and transparent.

It is also essential that the leader focuses all the future plans of the university around the academic ambitions having primacy. A university may be a very big institution with some very complex challenges, but it is not just a big business. It is a public body with important public duties and a historical and current mission to teach and engage in scholarship. It is vital that that is constantly articulated not only to ensure the proper focus of future plans but also to reassure staff and students that everyone, including leaders, remain aware of that primary purpose.

Nowadays, of course, the role of the governing body in leadership has become much more prominent. I was always aware that there were three relationships I. had to get right: with the Provost, with the Chief Operating Officer and finally with the Chair of Council. The legal accountabilities and liabilities of trustees of a university in the UK are now substantial. No longer is being a governor a pleasant duty on five Friday afternoons a year following an agreeable lunch. External governors tend to be successful businessmen, senior health managers and senior civil servants. They see life in a very different way. Most arrive with the idea that running a university is a doddle and they could easily do it by early afternoon on a Monday. You can see the slow realisation over the next few months that a) the institution is complex with many relationships b) there is a

greater public duty and c) you can't just tell people what to do. It is the role of the VC and the Chair to manage that transition and to keep the primary purpose of the university front and centre in all discussions. These governors can add huge value. Our Finance Committee was chaired by a very successful entrepreneur and he persuaded us to take more strategic risk that we, as a rather conservative institution, would have and it paid off. Real added value.

So finally, we come to the times when the leader just has to say, "that's how it is". That's really quite simple when the challenge is a fire in Chemistry. It becomes more complex when there is not consensus or the only person who can see the whole picture is the leader. The example that I would use is our submission to the last REF. There were loads of rumour about what level of research would be funded and what wouldn't. Research papers were scored from 1* to 4* where 1* was of national significance and 2* to 4* were of international significance with 4* being world leading.

Some of the more hawkish members of Senate wanted only 3* and 4* research submitted so that we could have a high league table position. This was my fifth assessment exercise and that experience taught me that the implications of such a decision were very significant. Of course, we would get a high league table

position but the financial hit in the decreased volume could exceed £10 million per year on a £50 million income stream – completely unsustainable over a 7-year period. Even more importantly to me, was the implications for those academic staff excluded under such a plan. They were more likely to be young and more likely to be part-time and with caring responsibilities. Also 2* research was of international significance and as I said to Senate “Surely we are proud of international level research and we should submit it”. Also, I stressed the values of our university which were to support our colleagues and do what we considered right and not what we guessed would be the vagaries of an assessment and funding construction over which we had no control.

There was much debate at senate but in the end, they went with my pretty direct advice. Bristol was one of only 4 universities who submitted above 90% of the relevant staff. It transpired that league tables were constructed around percentage submitted and we came equal fourth with Oxford. For me, the most important factor was that 100 odd staff, who would have been excluded under the original plan, were part of that success, and felt valued by their university. Many of those will go on to make a real difference to students and to new scholarship. The impact on moral was very positive.

I suppose what the lesson from that decision was that we stuck to the values of the university – we stuck to fairness, collegiality and respect of colleagues. The discussions also took place in year 13 of my Vice-Chancellorship and my conclusion is that my previous behaviour had built up that level of political capital in the tank that academic staff would trust me to be so directive on this point. I don't want to take the credit for this – this was a collective decision, those in Senate knew the risk i.e. we could have combined a poor league table position with a poor financial outcome if the mechanisms had been different. There were also those in Senate who continued to disagree with the decision but they accepted the decision of the majority. It does, however, show that a university can make serious collective decisions when it has to.

And so my presentation comes to an end. I hope that some of my observations have stimulated you and I appreciate that some of you may disagree with my analysis. Perhaps I should end by reminding everyone that universities are precious places bursting with talent and creativity and that we must do all in our power to ensure their continued momentum. A final observation. On day 2 of my Vice-Chancellorship I was standing on the corner of the road outside Senate House when I was struck by the weight of history and tradition of Bristol and responsibility of properly guiding somewhere so important to people and the

society it serves. I realised that the university had a well established momentum and that whilst I would come and I would go, the University of Bristol would continue well into the future. I became acutely aware that my greatest responsibility was not to damage this great institution by my actions. Maybe we should all keep thought and duty that uppermost in our minds as we present and debate over the next two days.

Thank you