



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

USAP

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSORS

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## Speeches of the 2017 Annual Dinner (1 November 2017)

### **Toast to the University**

***Professor Les Copeland***, BSc PhD Grad Dip AICD, Emeritus Professor  
Sydney Institute of Agriculture, School of Life and Environmental Sciences

Immediate Past President of USAP

### **Response on behalf of the University**

***Professor Roger Tanner***, BSc Brist MS Calif PhD Manc, FRS FAA FTSE FASME

HonFIEAust FAFMS, *PN Russell Professor of Mechanical Engineering*

Former Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research) (precursor to the current DVC role)

## ***Professor Les Copeland***

After a dinner is always a difficult time to speak. As someone who dabbles in nutritional biochemistry, I am conscious that signals along the gut-brain axis are mostly directed towards the gut.

I have had a long association with USYD and so before proposing a toast I will make a few remarks about the University as I saw it at three times: in 1964, when I first enrolled as a student; in 1974; when I joined the academic staff; and 2017, when I joined the fiscally retired.

### **1964**

According to the University Calendar, USYD had about 15,000 students, the budget was £11 M (equivalent to \$297 M in 2017), of which about 35% was designated “research”; there were about 80 professors, 20 emeritus professors and 63 staff referred to as in central admin portfolios (+ some additional staff in libraries, museums, special units). There was a VC (Stephen Roberts), DVC, Assistant Principal, Registrar and Deputy Registrar; RI Tanner was a senior lecturer in Engineering

It was an exciting time to be a student – the social awakening of the 1960s led to more liberal attitudes; conscription and the Vietnam War prompted student activism, such that students were often referred to as revolting. A lot of effort was made to police the diameter of high heels worn on the Fisher Library linoleum, and shooing people off the Main Quad Lawn.

There was no problem getting students to attend lectures, rather it was how to stop hordes not enrolled in a class who wanted to listen to eccentric but brilliant professors (who would nowadays be deemed extremes of political incorrectness) - Fred May, Italian (whose office was a sight to behold as he left his administration to “time and forces of nature”, and who gained notoriety and admiration for having a copy of Nabokov’s *Lolita* confiscated – can you imagine that happening today); Harry Messel, Physics (who always enjoyed testing the boundaries); Henry Mayer, Government (a chain-smoking polemicist, who took pleasure in stubbing out his cigarettes on the front bench of the lecture room); Charles Birch, Biology and Peter Simpson, Chemistry (who occasionally liked to shock students with risqué jokes).

### **1974**

USYD had 17,000 students, 1,150 full-time academics out of a total staff of 3,450; the number of staff in central admin portfolios had grown in 10 years to about 120. The budget was \$43 M (\$338 M in 2017) of which about 35% was “research”. Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turner were prominent student leaders and were at each other then, as now. Battles raged about the teaching of political economy leading to some of the staff being considered as revolting.

As a new academic, I was left to focus on teaching and research for the next 15 years. We didn’t fill filing cabinets with strategic plans, and as someone who taught lab classes, we knew about and practiced our duty of care to students without masses of paperwork on compliance. An early piece of advice I was given by my Head of Department when I started to sit on committees was “if you’re uncertain as to how to vote on a matter, vote in the opposite way to the Faculty of Medicine”- he, like most others of his era, wasn’t charmed by their sense of entitlement.

## **Fast forward to 2017**

USYD has close to 60,000 students with a very different staff demographic. There are 5,350 academic and general staff designated as being in faculties, with 2,260 staff (30%) in central admin portfolios. Income is shown as \$2.1 B, with 24% (\$513 M) for research.

Simplistic comparisons are dangerous for highly complex enterprises such as a university, but over last 40 years, the increase in size of the total budget has kept slightly ahead of the increase in student numbers. However, the research effort claims a decreasing proportion of the budget and the staffing profile has changed dramatically.

Externalities have brought major disruptive changes in the last 20 years that universities everywhere are struggling with:

- commoditization of education, which is now regarded more as an export industry worth \$30 B than as capacity building
- the digital transformation of how we teach and do research has changed processes and brought data-based decision-making; but are these changes replacements for intellectual inspiration

We can't hold back the tide, so we need to adapt. As Charles Darwin said: *It's not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most adaptable to change.*

Universities are complex systems, which have inherent resilience. They thrive despite, not because of, what the administrators do. The phenotype (appearance) of USYD might have changed in the 50+ years I have been here, but the genotype (i.e., values) of its academics seems unchanged. If the University harnesses this intellectual capital, I'm confident it will adapt to change and that in 50 and 100 years a group of professors will enjoy collegial dinners (of whatever delicacies printed or other technological food might bring), and will no doubt continue to fulminate against the administrators.

So please join me in toasting the University of Sydney, in celebration of its illustrious past and to the outlook for a great future.

## ***Professor Roger Tanner***

Being called on to reply to the Toast is a serious matter. Recently I have rarely had to speak on the University's behalf and I am possibly not certified to do so -but- here goes!

I looked up the definition of University in my old Oxford English dictionary (ca. 1959) and found a University is 'The whole body of teachers and students pursuing, at a particular place, the higher branches of learning'.

Is that relevant here and now? I looked at the website (now orange and black- copying Princeton) and I found that we have over 50,000 students, 12000 postgraduates, 3360 academics and over 5000 Admin staff. The OED does not mention Admin staff in its definition, yet they have become an overwhelming presence in our institution.

Recently Ross Gittins (the Sydney Morning Herald economics editor, who gave us an excellent talk at this dinner a few years ago) had a column in the SMH which supported the cutting of funds to universities because of their bloated administrations. So this problem is becoming noticed, and I wondered if it was true for Sydney University.

In the late 1990s there was the V/C (at first Don McNicol, then Gavin Brown), the DV/C, myself as PVC (Research), the Registrar and Lorraine Phelan who looked after fundraising. Total- six- they were all visible and more or less accessible.

Now we have the V/C, the Provost, 4 DV/Cs, 4PV/Cs, 4 Vice – Principals, and a legal officer. Total -15- mostly highly invisible.

The amazing thing about his group is that except for three (V/C, Provost and Legal officer) the average time since appointment to the job is 1 year! Not quite like the Trump Whitehouse, but close to it.

The 15 do the same work as was done by about six 20 years ago. Assuming an exponential growth over the last 20 years this amounts to about a 5% increase per year, so by the University Bicentenary in 2050, at the same rate of growth, one would expect 75 in these higher echelons. This would require at least one more level of management (perhaps Super Provosts?).

One curious thing that has happened recently in our School and elsewhere is the sudden imposition of a well-paid School Manager - not responsible to the Head of School, but to some other official; no input from HoD as to whom was appointed. It is hard to find out what these officers do and why they are necessary- there seems to be little or no contact with staff and students. Although it is not an exact parallel it reminds me of the Chinese university system- a Party member must be embedded in each academic unit.

I have had about two emails from our School Manager in nearly a year- one was an exhortation to attend the Faculty Cultural Competence workshop to 'learn more about the history of Indigenous Australians, gain cultural competence training, and foster self-awareness of personal and cultural assumptions'. (I already deal with seven different cultures in our students and post-docs, so I am rather too busy to attend, but I hope someone will go to this worthy workshop).

If the Admin worked better with the present horde of well-paid staff and their considerable entourages, then well and good. But many feel the increasingly centralized structure is unhelpful to academics and actually increases their workload in a direction that does not help our world standing as a University, which is largely based on research and teaching performance by academics.

Now to the reply. Les Copeland has been the backbone of USAP for a long time and I thank him for his devotion to the task. Despite the whinges above, he is an example, which shows that it is nevertheless possible, because of excellent colleagues and students, to do good research and teaching at the University. Hence, in closing, on behalf of the University I sincerely thank Les for his remarks and for the Toast.