The late Bronwyn Oliver’s steel-ribbed sculpture rests gently behind a pathway in the Botanic Gardens. It is of a giant palm frond, open to the elements. To the left, sleek and grey, stands our Conservatorium of Music under the multi-talented Kim Walker, its Victorian ramparts in the further distance. In front is a rough hewn stone wall, of familiar Sydney sandstone, where once were the mud-flats of Sydney Harbour, subject of the sculpture’s inscription.

“This sculpture is intended to symbolise an elemental form washed up by the tide, blown by the wind, eroded by water and laden with the potential for vigour and transformation. It began with the form of the palm above. Before European settlement this foreshore was a mud-flat, site of seeds and flotsam, washed up by the waves. Ships arrived on the tide in 1788 and crops were planted nearby soon afterwards. The area has been dedicated ever since to the introduction and propagation of plants, reflecting the changing cultural and horticultural needs of the day.”

How apt to describe Sydney University, both its beginnings and in its contemporary setting. Just under 70 years from that landing, still in the lifetime of the oldest of those European settlers, Sydney University found its origins. Constructed out of that Sydney sandstone, the Great Hall became home to around 20 students, its carved Victorian gothic a monumental act of faith in higher learning. Across the harbour, construction was proceeding on the largest civil works of the 19th century in the Southern Hemisphere. I refer to the Gladesville Asylum, now site of our Rozelle College of the Arts, engaged in the fine madness of artistic creation in the visual arts, under the dedicated Professor Colin Rhodes.

That fledgling university at Grose Farm would not have been possible without the introduction of exotics alongside our local species, injecting hybrid vigour. I refer to the importation of professors from the great universities of Edinburgh, Oxford and Cambridge and elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

There was neither then nor today any sense of parochial complacency. Nowadays Sydney University embraces talent wherever it can find it, looking to our neighbourhood in the Asian-Pacific region as well as to Europe and the United States.

Sydney’s success in winning the United States Studies Centre, greatly assisted by its planning director, the distinguished internationalist Professor Robert O’Neill, was against competition from every leading university in the country. That success brings opportunity for collaboration both intra-mural and international. Within Sydney University there is already fruitful interaction with our Graduate School of Government under Professor Geoff Gallop (former Premier of Western Australia), and the chair in International Security (funded by an extraordinarily generous alumnus Michael Hintze), Professor Alan Dupont. The latter is a leader in the debate on geopolitical aspects of climate change.

Internationally, the success of our United States Studies Centre success and other initiatives have brought Sydney University unparalleled opportunities for its students and faculty to engage with United States universities and institutes of the highest rank, with its leading faculty ever more keen to teach here.

By these kinds of initiatives, Sydney matches the depth of its traditional connections in the United Kingdom, exemplified by recent partnerships such as between our Faculty of Law and those of Oxford and Harvard – negotiated by Professor Ron McCallum, a remarkable Dean of Law, who is shortly to retire from his position as Dean. These stand with important European relationships, allowing our students to study abroad at postgraduate and now also at undergraduate level on semester exchange.
These specialised centres I have described share common soil with the Humanities, recently ranked 5th in the world, as well as with the Faculty of Economics and Business, with its unique combination of accreditations in both the United States and Europe. There are also important cross-links in public policy between the social sciences and the traditional physical and medical sciences, particularly biotechnology. As the Vice-Chancellor has emphasised, our capacity to continue to dominate competition for research grants, soon to operate under a Research Quality Framework, critically depends on our refurbishing and expanding research infrastructure, itself a very expensive undertaking.

Though here we look to government, State and Federal, for assistance, we know that self help is essential. While encouraging benefaction is critical, we win enduring support by the quality of our teaching and research as well as by demonstrating to the community that we are outstandingly well managed. This requires that we maintain a productive partnership between Senate, as this University’s governing body, and its senior management, led by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Gavin Brown.

In his report, Professor Brown refers to our new Strategic Plan with 2006 its first year of execution. The challenge for the University is to enhance our capacity to measure our performance objectively. This is not only by reference to metrics where these are meaningful. It is also by ranking Sydney University against the strongest of our competitors in key areas, looking always to enhance our strengths and address our weaknesses. That calls for honesty and accurate, relevant information.

Universities are not unlike great gardens and the occasional sculptures within them. They are above all the product of discerning design, intense and unremitting effort and deep insight. As I retire as Chancellor, I know that the custodians of our great university will bring to bear those qualities with a sense of both its antiquity and contemporary relevance.

The Hon Justice Kim Santow OAM

Chancellor