People often ask what is meant by a ‘comprehensive research-intensive university’. For the first step towards an answer we can turn to the UK’s Times Higher Education Supplement QS Rankings. These rankings compare world universities across each of five broad research fields – Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences and Biomedicine, Engineering and IT, Natural Sciences. Let us define an outstanding comprehensive research university as one which ranks in the top 40 in all five fields. This criterion is satisfied by only 16 universities in the world and the University of Sydney is one of them.

In fact we interpret ‘comprehensive’ much more broadly and are committed to the all-round student experience. The research ethos must permeate the classroom so that students are able to study with those who are working at the frontiers of knowledge. That is necessary but not sufficient because explicit attention must be given to the other factors which provide quality in the learning and teaching environment.

Amongst these is the structure of the curriculum itself. The University of Sydney provides choice. It is possible to undertake a clear-cut three-year undergraduate program. The more ambitious may add an honours year which, for many individuals, is a pathway to research. Alternatively students may enter a double degree program combining Arts/Law, Science/Economics, Engineering/Liberal Studies and a host of others. These flexible programs are carefully organised so that they may be completed in five years. At the same time, over many years, we have moved several professional programs to graduate entry, encouraging general study before specialisation. Moreover we try as far as possible to allow flexibility and interchange amongst programs.

This is more costly and more difficult to administer than a simple model but we do not believe that rigid decisions with long-term consequences should be forced on high school students. Intellectual discovery and personal discovery go hand in hand so we offer many pathways.

‘Comprehensive’, in my lexicon, speaks also of activity outside the classroom. I am delighted each year that I can congratulate Sydney University world champions. This year our team of Julia Bowles and Anna Garsia won the World Intervarsity Debating Championships. Liz Kell and Brooke Pratley won gold in the women’s double scull at the World Rowing Championships. Fiona Hammond and Taniele Gofers were part of the Australian women’s water polo team that won the World Cup in China and Belinda Snell and Donna O’Connor part of the Australian women’s basketball team that won the World Championship in Brazil. Renee Kirby won gold at the U23 World Championships. Marty Rabjohns coxed the World Cup winning men’s eight and Matt Ryan was part of the crew. Ben Barzach was part of the gold medal four-man crew which won the match racing sailing title at the World University Championships at Palma de Mallorca and Elsa O’Hanlon won gold in the lightweight single scull at the World University Championships in Lithuania.

I have used a tough yardstick for choosing that list – only winners, only in world competition. Our students have many more outstanding achievements – not least three Rhodes scholarships in the last round. The haunting thought is that this could be the last exquisite song of a dying swan. The government’s VSU legislation has yet to strike home. Because we are denied the capacity to levy an amenities fee for our non-classroom activity, this becomes a matter of individual payment, external benefaction and university subsidy. In sports alone we will lose $3 million per year and are working hard to plan a sustainable future.

A sign of the times is that, after years of domination, we came third in this year’s Australian University Games. The explanation is simple. The games were held in Adelaide and the point scoring system rewards all competitors. Melbourne and Monash were able to raise 450 athletes each, we could send 250. This local event is now under threat from geography and cost.
I refuse to designate the student experience as a non-core activity, even if it appears nowhere in international league tables. The Senate has wisely agreed that we must delay spending on other priorities so that we do not lose what has taken years to build. The problem, of course, is that these other priorities, most especially research infrastructure, are fundamental to our mission.

Just as our students are important so are our staff. So much of what we can achieve is dependent on the quality of the “backroom” people who make the organisation function. We have been undergoing major changes in HR, in IT and in the area responsible for providing and deploying physical infrastructure. Improving functionality is a key priority.

Our increasingly recognised research success is a magnet for attracting and recruiting more world-class research leaders in international competition. There are many outstanding recent appointments which fill me with excitement. However this process will slow down unless we can keep pace by providing well-equipped buildings where these researchers can work. At the same time student numbers have increased and we need more and better teaching space. Important new ventures like the United States Studies Centre, which we won this year in tough national competition, add to building demand.

The building program has been stepping up significantly over recent years and Campus 2010 is on track. We opened the impressive new IT building in 2006 and the new Law School, for a tantalising period a huge hole in the ground, is scheduled for completion at the end of 2008. These developments which seemed to some grandiose at the conceptual stage now look inadequate! Now we are planning a bold life sciences complex built around part of St John’s Oval, but there are many more developments which demand attention and for which we must raise money.

Encouraging in this regard are relations with both State and Federal governments. For example, both have given strong support to the rapid development of the Brain and Mind Research Institute with its mission to tackle mental illness through basic and translational research married with psychiatric outreach.

In last year’s report I wrote in the context of our newly adopted Strategic Plan and warned that it was the start of a perilous but exciting journey. 2006 was the first year of execution of that plan. It is obvious from the year’s report that the University continues on an upward trajectory with outstanding achievements that further fuel our ambition.

We must remember that sustainable achievements are built on years of work so I am both cautious and impatient over the progress we have made in 2006. We have a long way to go in operationalising our plan, one that must remain responsive to changes in the external environment in which we pursue our objectives. I was thrilled that Michael Hintze was celebrated by the Business Higher Education Round Table in 2006 as an exemplary benefactor. Michael made it possible for us to institute a chair in International Security but, more importantly, he tells everyone who will listen that relatively small contributions can make a serious positive influence on our progress to our goals.

I believe that this year’s report, not simply a catalogue of outcomes, shows that throughout the University there is dedicated commitment to self help but we are not so proud as to imagine that we can reach forward without the crucial help of our friends and supporters.

Professor Gavin Brown AO
Vice-Chancellor and Principal