The University of Sydney

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Inaugural address

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Chancellor, colleagues, distinguished guests:

Thank you, Chancellor, for your very kind welcome back to the University of Sydney. And what an exciting time this is to return. Since I arrived, I have been visiting faculties and have found the University in a very fine condition indeed. For that we owe my predecessor, Professor Brown, an enormous debt of thanks. But we also owe a debt to over 50,000 of his colleagues, the staff and students of the University, whose work and commitment to this place have brought about a remarkable transformation over the past decade. I am excited to return to the institution that, together, they have created.

It's also an exciting time to be returning to Sydney for a different, and potentially more unsettling, reason. The university sector in Australia is under thorough review. Australia, a country of enormous wealth, has the chance to build upon its fine university tradition. But times of review are uncertain times: and we could just as easily undermine, as build upon, our rich inheritance. So what do we need to steer this University through a time of potential change? What do we need to steer this great institution towards the future?

In his farewell address, my predecessor pointed out that universities are extremely flexible institutions, institutions that have survived precisely because they adapt to the changing demands made upon them. That is a true claim, and an important one in a world too quick to criticise us for an alleged inflexibility. The changes that have taken place here since I left Sydney in 1988 are evidence that universities can be extremely responsive to the conditions in which they are working.

Adaptability can be a good thing. But it is not if it detracts us from our core mission and our core values. Only clarity about those things will help us to chart a steady course through the uncertain times ahead. Only clarity about those things will help us to convince our community of the value of what we do. It is clarity about our mission and our values that we need in a time of change.

So who are we? What is our mission? Sydney is a world-class research University that also provides quality education across a very wide range—a range far wider than that of many of our international competitors. We work in fields from the most theoretical to the most applied. That broad range does us no favours in the international league tables. But I have found a deep commitment here to that distinctive dual mission that I am keen to affirm.

However, our mission is not just to be broad in our range of activities. It is also to be very good at what we do, to be a standard setter in both teaching and research. Sydney is unashamedly committed to excellence. This is an elite, but not elitist, place. It is a place aspiring to the highest quality research, and to research-led teaching appropriate to the very particular needs of our extremely bright students, arguably the country's most able cohort. Sydney is a place committed to finding the best in people of potential from all social backgrounds. Of course, the University does not always meet its aspirations. No university does—or at least none with a calling worthy of the name. But just as a small group of our country's athletes, drawn from all sorts of communities, are fueled by an aspiration to be amongst the elite in their sport, so universities such as Sydney should aspire to be amongst the very best, particularly in areas of national and regional importance.

If our mission, then, is to be an elite, but not elitist, University, engaged in a broad range of teaching and research, what should be our core values? That is a question that is urgent and pressing. I want to propose core values in each of the areas of research, teaching and university governance. Some of those values will inevitably be contentious. Maintaining them, when they are often in tension with one another, will be difficult. But articulating them—encouraging debate around them— is an important beginning.

In the area of research, I suggest that our core value should be truth, however contested that concept may be. The ultimate criterion by which we assess our work should be whether it tells us things that we believe, however hesitantly and contingently, to be true. All other metrics, necessary evils though they may be, are ultimately distorting. Counting pages privileges the prolix over the well expressed. Counting research income privileges the empirical over the theoretical. Counting citations privileges the natural sciences over the humanities. A modern university administrator must keep an eye on these metrics, but she must never think that they are anything but poor proxies for the quality of the work of her institution. She must never be fooled by the numerical neatness of those proxies for the quality that she is trying to measure.

Of course, in suggesting that truth should be our core research value, I am not suggesting that it should be our only one. I am simply claiming a priority for it.

Take, for example, the value of 'relevance'. It is essential that we engage with our community in the urgent and practical issues that we face together, issues that need immediate solution. Both the tax-payer and our donor community have a right to expect that we will. Engaging with the questions that our community asks, allowing our community to help set the agenda, can be a challenging task for a university. Our community tends to ask questions that are on the one hand broader, and the other more applied, than those that academics have felt confident in answering. But both thematic and applied work is crucial.

In relation to thematic work, we need to ensure that our research respects the epistemological power of the core disciplines. Their methodologies lend a rigour to our work. However, we also need to find ways of ensuring that we know what we know, and can communicate what we know, both internally and externally, in broad thematic areas of pressing importance—that we can use the puzzle pieces provided by the disciplines to make a bigger picture. We need both to keep our methodological tools sharp, and to be tackling the wider questions that our community tends to ask—questions about cancer, or climate change, or poverty, or economic and social development. We need to show that the questions we are answering are worth asking and, to that extent, that our work is relevant. Moreover, doing so will be good for us, as well as for our community. Keeping a balance between the disciplinary and the thematic will lead to better, more interesting, research. The problems of the world rarely present in disciplinary boxes.

But although relevance is an important value in the research space, it can also be a dangerous one. An essential part of the function of the university is to answer the questions that our community has not yet thought to ask, that it does not know will be important. Who could today deny that an understanding of the history of Islam and of its social, religious and intellectual traditions is incredibly 'relevant' to public policy formulation in western countries such as Australia? Who would have guessed that it would be so forty years ago when, nevertheless, careful work was being done in these fields in western universities. Or take an example from the natural sciences. When a Fellow of my Oxford college, John Goodenough, and his colleague Bruce Todd invented the lithium battery, few foresaw the value of their invention. Not many inventions are now more 'relevant' or useful.

So relevance is an important research value, but it is dangerous if it blinds us to our distinctive place in the innovation process. We should certainly address the 'relevant', but we must never forget the distinctive contribution that we have to make in the advancement of fundamental understanding, both in the arts and sciences. Our distinctive place in the innovation chain is right at the beginning. And for work both theoretical and applied, both disciplinary and thematic, the truth question—the question whether our research tells us things that are true—remains, I would suggest, the central, one.

Well what of teaching? If truth should be our core value in research, what should be our core value in that field? Here, I think, it is useful to refer to those languages that make a distinction between 'education' and 'instruction'. I have no doubt that our core value should be 'education' in its broadest, in its moral, sense, and not merely 'instruction'.

This has two parts: first, we should be honing fundamental intellectual skills, we should be training, and not merely filling, minds. We should be helping our students to think critically and independently, to identify a good argument from a bad one, to assess evidence, to construct an argument of their own and to communicate it effectively. We should give them the confidence to do this even in new fields. We should be honing these skills in environments in which understanding is not simply disseminated, it is also created: environments in which the life of the mind is highly prized and in which there is excitement about ideas. It is vital that intellectually able students such as ours have the chance to be in close proximity with those engaged in fundamental research. Such proximity is not easy to sustain under a funding model that necessitates far less small group teaching than any would think optimal. But it is crucial if we are to equip our students to make the most of their talent. Those intellectual skills, and that excitement, is a gift that will long outlast much of the content that we teach, and when our best current understandings of the truth have been shown to be inadequate.

Second, we should encourage our students to participate fully in all the activities that the University has to offer. Drawn as they are from very different communities, and with different experiences, they have at least as much to teach one another as we have to teach them. And they do that, not only in the classroom, but also in the wide range of activities that make up the student experience. Participation should be the keyword here. Many students have their confidence built, and form deep and lasting friendships, when they first try activities that they have never tried before. That is an important part of a University experience. It is hard to maintain in a commuter university, and in a culture that can increasingly see university education as an employment certification process, but for those able and willing to be involved, it can be personally transformative.

I should emphasise that there is now much pressure to see university education, particularly for undergraduates, in different terms to these. There is pressure to see it as merely instruction, or as preparation for one career or another. But our core value should be education, and education in its broadest sense. That is a tradition of this University that it has fought hard in recent years to maintain. It is a tradition that we should defend, and prosper, even further.

Finally, what of governance? What should be our core value in that area of our life together? Here the core value has to be accountable self-government. That works best at both the level of the individual university, and that of the university sector more generally. A university should be a federation of self-governing academic communities. Our schools and faculties know far better than any administrative aparatchik such as me the exciting frontiers in their area of research and teaching. They know their own businesses very well. Empowered to do so, and in an environment in which they understand clearly how their resources are earned and spent, they will make far more creative and fruitful strategic decisions than I would ever make on their behalf. The role of the central administration is then financial and academic audit, ensuring that the faculties work together so that there is consistency and coherence in the whole (so that the whole is more than the sum of the parts), and advocacy for their work in the wider world. That is a governance process that is neither top-down, nor bottom-up, but dialogic, and very dynamic. It is a governance process that can produce extraordinary results: the type of results produced by clever people given the freedom to do what they do well.

But the same principle applies in the sector more generally. Governments can be easily tempted into the micro-management of the university sector. They set up funds to be spent in very specific ways, and devise very careful incentive structures. But the danger is that enormous amounts can be spent on the devising, maintaining and auditing of those funds, both by governments and universities, far more than is justified by the results that they produce. Part of the answer is simpler public funding mechanisms with more self-government by the university, appropriately audited around quality in teaching and research. In other words, the model that I am advocating for the individual university itself works well writ large for the sector as a whole.

Another answer, of course, is for universities to wean themselves off their considerable dependence upon government funding. And we do need greater independence. We need to be talking to industry about more funding for basic research than Australian universities have known. We need to be talking to our communities about the need for greater levels of philanthropic support than have been typical in this country, and to government about ways in which philanthropic support for universities could be encouraged. We need to be talking to government about ways in which higher levels of contribution from students who could afford it, might be compatible with needs blind admission and with generous packages of financial support for students who could not. These are all, of course, difficult conversations to have, but unless we begin to explore some of these options, Australian universities may never be able to achieve either the levels of funding, or the freedom, that they require to achieve their world-class potential.

So in a time of change we need a clear vision of our mission and core values, values that I would suggest are those of truth, education and self-government. But we probably need something more as well. And we are lucky at Sydney because we have it in abundance. We need a commitment to the place, and a strong belief in what we do. I am privileged that I have only ever worked in universities of which people are proud to be a part, however self-critical they may be. Sydney is a university that is deeply loved and to which I am honoured to return. But even more, it is a university with a proud tradition of defiant belief in the value of the university enterprise. When this quadrangle was constructed, the university had only a handful of students and stood at the outskirts of a remote provincial outpost. It stands as an icon of our forebears' insane belief in the importance of what they were founding and in its great future. They built this quadrangle because they believed that they could achieve great things. With a clear sense of our mission, with an understanding of our core values, and with a little of their Chuptzpah, I believe that we can preserve what they saw as important even in a time of change, and that we can achieve far more in the future than they might ever have imagined. It is a privilege to be a part of that process.

http://www.usyd.edu.au/vice-chancellor