Transforming Ideas
Our Strategic Action Plan
2018
Welcome from the Director

We live in deeply turbulent times.

Across the world, politics is in turmoil, with countries witnessing the collapse of the established parties of old and the rise of new, far more forthright, forces. At the same time, economies are grappling with spiraling inequality and societies are responding to transformations in everyday ways of life on a scale rarely predicted only a few decades ago.

What is the task of a great university standing amongst all of this change?

The answers to this question are surely multiple, but one must be to bring our enormous breadth and depth of research expertise and wisdom to help people of all backgrounds make sense of the change that is going all around them. Learning from the past and glimpsing the future is, after all, what university research is all about.

So that is what the Sydney Policy Lab sets out to do.

We bring the very best researchers at the University of Sydney face-to-face with people from every different walk of life to help identify and understand the forces that are shaping all of our lives and together plot a path to a different future.

The Sydney Policy Lab is, as the name suggests, a place of experimentation. A place where people will meet, investigate, debate and reach conclusions together – and then do it all over again, as we try to make sense of this rapidly changing world of ours and work out how we can collectively make a difference.

We can only succeed in doing that, of course, with your help, and the help of your colleagues, families, neighbours and communities. That’s why, in a very real sense, the Sydney Policy Lab is your Policy Lab.

This strategy sets out what the Lab aims to achieve in the world, how it hopes to do it and the ways in which you might be able to play a part in its work.

I hope you enjoy it and feel that the ideas within it initiate a process of working together. Do let me know what you think and do please stay in touch.

Marc Stears
Director, Sydney Policy Lab
**Mission**

The Sydney Policy Lab exists to build dynamic, new partnerships between the world-class researchers at the University of Sydney, politicians, public servants, business leaders, policy advocates, campaigners and members of the broader community.

We do so because it is only truly inclusive and broad-based collaborations such as these that are capable of unlocking the most pressing public policy challenges of our turbulent times, including inequality, the implications of new technologies and the future of democratic politics itself.

Our fundamental goal is to use these partnerships to make a real, positive difference to each of the partners with whom we work and to build long-lasting policy change that benefits Australia and the world.

Reflecting this core mission, our fundamental aims are to:

- **create new and dynamic partnerships** that bridge the gap between the academic and policy-making communities and include new or previously excluded voices in the policymaking and research process.
- **build the skills and capabilities of University of Sydney researchers** to conduct genuinely impactful research and to feel confident in engaging in policy-making, campaigning and advocacy in the longer term.
- **challenge prevailing orthodoxies of policymakers** where required, opening up new debates and generating innovative policy programs and ideas.
- **help effect a positive change in public policy** capable of enhancing the quality of life available to citizens, including citizens’ economic well-being, the quality of their democratic experience and their secure sense of belonging in society.
Background

The University of Sydney recognises that we all live in deeply turbulent times, where huge social, political and economic challenges confront us all. The University also recognises that it has an opportunity and a duty to help solve those problems. The Lab was established as part of the University’s 2016-20 Strategic Plan and joins similar initiatives at many of the world’s major universities, including the Institute for Politics at Chicago, the Ash Center at Harvard and the Bennett Institute at Cambridge.

In 2018, the Sydney Policy Lab team consulted widely with academics and staff of the University and with external stakeholders to ascertain what people believe the Lab can most successfully bring to the development of public policy and to enhance the research and reputation of the University.

This consultation included one-to-one meetings with University of Sydney researchers and staff of different levels of experience and seniority, group discussions with participants from a wide range of Schools and Faculties and a University-wide online survey. We also met one-to-one and in small groups with politicians, policy makers, policy researchers, journalists and campaigners from across Australia and from overseas. We are hugely grateful to everyone who gave their time and shared their ideas with us.

These discussions taken together have led to the strategic plan that is outlined here.
Thematic Priorities

The distinctive strength of the Sydney Policy Lab lies in its ability to create new, creative, dynamic partnerships between the world-class researchers at the University of Sydney and policy-makers, campaigners and the broader community.

Our consultation demonstrated that there is widespread excitement about that fundamental purpose of the Lab and a strong sense that it is an approach whose time has come.

Nonetheless, that core purpose is a broad ambition and as such the Lab will have a narrower set of priority areas for these partnerships to focus upon. In seeking to identify such priorities, the overall theme that has captured most excitement among those consulted both inside and outside the University has been: *transformation*.

The idea of transformation emerges from the strong sense that Australia and other developed democracies are entering a period of rapid and potentially far-reaching change. Although there is clearly great possibility in such a moment of change, at present it is also widely seen to be unsettling communities, causing anxiety especially among the most vulnerable groups in society, and causing politicians and public servants of all ideological allegiances to question some of their most fundamental assumptions. This sense is best captured in one concerning statistic from Ipsos Mori that reveals that only 25% of Australians currently believe that the next generation will enjoy a better quality of life than the current or previous generations.

As a result of this trepidation about the future, those we have consulted have strongly argued that what is needed is an organisation where new, big, bold ideas can be examined that have the potential to lead to pathways to a better, not worse, future for all Australians, and for the peoples of the world.

The consultation also revealed how this broad question of transformation and the pathway to a better future can be broken down further into three parts, which reflect the *economic*, *social* and *political* dimensions of the issue.

These three are: equality, belonging and power.
Thematic Priorities

1. Equality

The recent trend towards greater inequality, not just between the traditional socio-economic groups but also between generations, cultural and ethnic groups and regions of the country is now beyond dispute. What is less clear, however, is what is driving that trend and what might be done to ameliorate or reverse it. Is technology, and especially the rise of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning, a cause for optimism or pessimism when it comes to inequality? Are global companies who are driven by an orthodox understanding of shareholder value now being challenged by alternative models of ownership and control, as populations seek to reverse the inegalitarian trends of the last thirty years? What role do education and health services have in responding to the rise in inequality? Are new options like Universal Basic Income a distraction from concrete programs for change or a real possibility?
Thematic Priorities

2. Belonging

Alongside the rise of economic inequality and political distrust, there has been a dramatic upswing worldwide in the dominance of what have been variously called cultural and national questions or questions of belonging and identity. These concerns include, but are not restricted to, patterns of migration and social integration, the so-called “culture wars” that accompany public debate on gay marriage, the place of religion in society, changing understandings of gender and related concerns. They encompass also the relationship between place and peoples and the sense of social erosion and alienation currently reported in countries across the world. They further encompass questions of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Lab’s work will focus on many of these areas, and others, including themes related to the place of higher education itself in challenging traditional understandings of belonging and identity.
Priorities

3. Power

Faith in the established institutions of democracy is in precipitous decline in Australia, as it is in almost all of the developed democracies across the world. In the 2018 global Edelman Trust barometer, the level of distrust in politicians in Australia was surpassed only by Russia. We have witnessed elsewhere the electoral consequences of this decline, with the rise of populist political movements and the shattering of conventional parties on both the left and the right, but we are yet to see the deep and broad implications of this shift in Australia. This part of our work will focus on what changes could be made to politics, broadly considered, to reverse this trend towards populism and distrust. Do new participatory models, such as the participatory budgeting and city-based devolution popular in an increasing number of developed democracies, hold out hope? Are there more radical alternatives to conventional representative politics emerging? Is it possible even to talk of a period of post-democracy? How might people from outside of the political elite play a role in shaping a new political settlement? How might the public service itself react?

In developing research and partnerships in each of these three areas, we will especially welcome activities that stretch beyond the traditional modes of public policy analysis, including insights from the humanities and the creative arts and ideas originating from science, environment, technology, engineering and mathematics.
Activities

Our program of activities will be designed to advance our core purpose of creating dynamic, new partnerships to enhance the public good, especially as it relates to these central priorities of assisting Australia and the world transition to a future that is more equal, more fully participatory and where people can enjoy a stable sense of their own identity.

We will conduct the following program of activities over the next three years:

1. Collaborative research program

In order to advance its aim of creating new, dynamic, creative partnerships between academics and the broader community, the Lab ran a grant scheme in the second half of 2017, providing relatively condition-free financial support to programs from a range of subject areas where academics had partnered with an external group. These projects have largely been successful and the scheme was appreciated by those who took part in it. Our aim in our next stage is to scale up this activity and connect it to the thematic priorities described above. In order to do so, we will appoint Research Leads or teams of Research Leads for each of the three thematic priorities. These Research Leads will work with the Policy Lab staff to allocate up to $75,000 p.a. in collaborative research in their area. These programs of research will include workshops, conferences, retreats, policy masterclasses, arts and drama events, to be designed collectively. Such activities are expected to result in academic journal and book projects and other forms of dissemination. We will appoint Research Leads in the second half of 2018 and will commence research activities at the beginning of the academic year 2019.

2. Training and education

The unique strength of the Lab rests in its ability to forge new, surprising and dynamic partnerships between researchers, policy-makers, campaigners and the broader community. As such, it is imperative that the Lab provides world-class training and education in co-production, co-design and related skill sets in order to allow its participants to succeed. During the consultation period we have found that there is much demand for broader training for skills associated with impact and engagement, including speechwriting and speech giving, social media, blogging, policy brief composition, public event facilitation and design, influencing skills, power mapping and related activities. We are in a position to offer most of this training in-house and will be devising a full program for 2019. It is our intention that this program will be a requirement for Policy Lab grantees and also made available for all academics. We currently anticipate a short course of between three and four sessions, probably offered twice or three times per year. We would expect Policy Lab Global Visitors also to offer masterclasses to accompany these training programs. Further, we will offer drop-in advisory services for researchers taking initial steps in collaborative policy research and will create a portal on the Lab website for on-going training opportunities.
Activities

3. Members, fellows and visitors

The Lab began a successful Fellowship program in early 2018, supporting experienced people from NGOs and public service professions into the University, to work closely with researchers in various Faculties. This has been a popular program and has enabled some impressive partnerships to incubate. We will continue to run the Fellowships program in 2019, with applications opening in the second half of 2018. We will also create a new Global Visitors scheme, transferring some of the resource currently used for the grant program for funding, which will enable us to bring world-recognized policy thinkers and practitioners into the University for visiting programs. Visitors would be required to provide a public lecture, masterclasses in the training program described below, media activity and some kind of community service with one of our partner organisations. The Visitors would be located in the Lab but also offered an affiliation with a Department, School or Faculty where appropriate. In addition, we will create a membership option for those in the policy community broadly considered who wish to have an affiliation with the Lab and are committed to supporting its work.

4. Public communication and events

Communication is at the heart of politics and policy-making; it is the way that ideas flow and minds get changed. The Lab is therefore developing a website of our own, independent from the Research Portfolio where we currently appear, with the sort of presence that equivalent organisations have globally, such as the Ash Center at Harvard University, the Institute for Politics at the University of Chicago, the Global Policy Lab at the LSE and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge. We will develop blogs, vlogs and other social media presence, with content produced in-house by our own team, by our grantees and the wider University community, by our Global Visitors and by external commentators. We will host both closed and confidential policy briefing or discussion sessions and more public-facing stimulating events for a wide audience. We will also develop close and continuing relationships with opinion formers, journalists and commentators from across Australia and beyond.
Governance and Membership

In addition to operating within the University’s internal governance frameworks, the Sydney Policy Lab will build a broader coalition of members to hold it to account, bolster its reach and profile and act as ambassadors for its cause. Through its members, the Sydney Policy Lab will create a high quality environment that forges and pushes performance.

The following categories of membership will be offered:

**Advisory Board:** this locally-focused Board will meet two or three times a year to offer their guidance to the Sydney Policy Lab and hold us to account. They will have an initial two year term and be composed of individuals with background and reputation in public policy and/or community campaigners, relevant office holders in public policy positions and academic representatives from the University. The Advisory Board will be between eight and ten people and should be made up of those likely to be able to contribute around two days of real work across the course of a year.

**Global Advisors:** world leaders in public policy conducted in the spirit of the Sydney Policy Lab (collaborations between scholars, policy-makers and community campaigners). We aim to recruit four members, drawn from the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia, with an initial two year term.

**Sydney Policy Lab Global Visitors:** major figures in public policy, community campaigning and scholarship who spend time at the Sydney Policy Lab working on a project or initiative, and who contribute to Sydney Policy Lab activities through training, mentoring and events. They shall be provided with desk space for the duration of their visit in the new building.

**Sydney Policy Lab Fellows:** those who are seconded to the University through the Sydney Policy Lab Fellowship program shall be called Fellows. They shall be entitled to access the Sydney Policy Lab shared space and facilities in the new building, in addition to facilities provided by their mentors and host faculties.

**Sydney Policy Lab Affiliated Researchers:** members of University research staff and research students who are involved in on-going Sydney Policy Lab activities and projects shall be called Sydney Policy Lab Affiliated Researchers. These shall include all grantees and former grantees. They shall be entitled to access the Sydney Policy Lab shared space for Lab related work. Those who are involved in significant projects (such as grant recipients) or ongoing collaborations will be expected to attend Sydney Policy Lab training.

**Sydney Policy Lab Associates:** influential figures in public policy or community campaigning who expect to have a long-term, on-going relationship with the Sydney Policy Lab, either through organizing and appearing at Sydney Policy Lab events, providing training and mentoring, refereeing grant applications, submitting joint grant applications and the like. They shall be entitled to access the Sydney Policy Lab shared space. They may include members of the Advisory Board and former Global Visitors.

**Sydney Policy Lab Members:** supporters who sign-up for events, communications and who are invited to play a role in shaping the direction and the future of the Lab, through blogs, vlogs and other member activities.
Concluding Thoughts

Universities across the world are increasingly recognising that they have a duty to assist the societies in which they are located respond to the enormous policy challenges of our times. Several successful initiatives have already been developed elsewhere and more institutions spring up week by week.

The Sydney Policy Lab aims to be among the first rank of these efforts. But it can only do so with the support of the University’s researchers and the broader community. It is by working together, in surprising, creative, dynamic partnership, that we can ensure that our research is genuinely impactful in helping to build a more prosperous, fair, secure and open society for all to enjoy. We hope you will join us.