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Report for NUPSA Inc. Executive Committee on Universities Australia Higher Education Conference

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Date: 05/03/17

Universities Australia Higher Education Conference 2017

National Convention Centre, Canberra, 1st-3rd March 2017

To summarise; the NUPSA President and the NUPSA International Officer attended the 2017 Universities Australia Higher Education Conference in Canberra. Universities Australia (UA) represents the peak University advocacy body in Australia. It is a continuation of the Australian Vice-chancellors advocacy body and in 2017 was celebrating its 10 year anniversary. UA has expanded its voice outside the traditional Vice-chancellor model and as such includes senior leaders from all Australian universities, industry leaders, government and most importantly, a small but growing student voice. NUPSA had previously attended UA in 2016 to develop a greater understanding of some of the key issues affecting postgraduate students across Australia and as such saw attendance at the conference in 2017 as critical.

The conference in 2017 focused on a couple of major themes; firstly, Universities must strive to be open and embracing of an international environment; secondly, Universities must strive to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the university environment; thirdly, universities and industry must develop better relationships to ensure they are producing the best candidates for the future work force.

I will give a brief account of the separate day's events below.

Day 1

-The first session of the morning began with a speech from the Minister for Education, the Hon. Simon Birmingham who outlined the government's commitment to education. The minister outlined that the current system is fair but was concerned about the continuation of the current structure for the future.

-The next session was delivered by the CEO of UA, Belinda Nixon who outlined the importance of UA as an organisation. From a student perspective graduates in a university sector help create jobs for other sectors as well contribute to the growth of salaries sector wide. Of interest was the fact that the student enrolment rate has skyrocketed (~750% in 10 years), yet attrition rates remain at similar levels.

-The plenary session of the morning was delivered by the former US Ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich who discussed Universities in a next gen world. The talk set to examine the current world climate in respect to changes in technology. The focus of the talk was on the 4th industry revolution which is causing rapid change in technology at a pace that governments cannot keep up with. Part of the issues in a global, cultural sense is that this is leading to massive disruption in the workplace, inflaming old rivalries between nation states and building distrust in the media. Essentially the future

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is here; but it is not evenly distributed. It is important to recognise that the initial industrial revolution led to massive crises over a 40 year period that led to similar situations been currently seen. In this respect universities need to play a leadership role in a difficult global period to ensure that they promote an international culture of openness and acceptance of people and ideas. This thought process will ensure that universities remain prosperous in the 21st century in respect to the technological disruptions.

-The initial lunch time session was delivered by the President of Nanyang Technical University, Singapore, Professor Bartill Anderson focusing of Global Research in New World Politics. The focus of this session continued on the themes introduced in the previous session, specifically highlighting the need for collaboration between institutions. In Australia alone, only 26% of collaborations occur in a single institution, where as 35% of collaborations occur between international institutions. In order to combat the nationalistic tide on the rise it is essential to collaborate internationally to ensure continued success. Japan was used as an example in the Asia market of a nation that had turned insular and as a result it had dropped in international rankings.

-The second lunch time session I specifically attended was entitled the “Shifting nature of student expectations” and was a personal highlight of the conference as the President of the National Union of Students (NUS), Ms. Sophie Johnston, and the President of the Council of Australia Postgraduate Associations (CAPA), Mr. Peter Derbyshire were given the opportunity to give a student perspective on their changing expectations in a university environment. From the NUS perspective the most important expectations from the student perspective were to provide quality education, to ensure greater investment into mental health, to change the campus culture in respect to sexual assault and to ensure that quality teachers are kept. From the CAPA, postgraduate perspective the student led experience was considered important for students. There were concerns related to the HDR degree structure, particularly as PhDs expected to take ~5 years were now expected to take 3 years, which place unreasonable demands on the student. There was a concern for coursework students not achieving the appropriate ‘soft skill’ training during their study. It was stated as whole, postgraduates expect to be treated like colleagues; and lastly, in respect to student representation and advocacy, that conversing with a wide, student cohort was important to develop and understanding of the student voice.

-Following lunch, I attended the concurrent stream entitled “Higher Education Policy”. The concerns of this session involved ensuring all bodies that involve higher education policy communicate effectively. This essentially meant that government, universities and industry must all be involved in the development of higher education policy. The focus from the industry perspective was that universities can do a poor job communicating with industry and this needs to change in order to ensure success working together.

-For the final session of the day I attended the concurrent stream entitled “Research: Publish or Perish?”. This session showed from an Australian perspective that young researchers are more likely to publish more often and the papers are more likely to be ‘conservative or safe’ in nature. Intriguingly, in Australia there appears to be a focus on quantity vs. quality in terms of papers. Some highlights included the fact that some important papers come from those which have specific industry engagement. Lastly, there was a focus on women in publishing and statistics show that female researchers publish less often and are less funded then their male counterparts.

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Day 2

-The morning session began with an address by the shadow Minister for Education, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek. The opposition reiterated their commitment to higher education and highlighted the fairness and success of the system. Of concern was the fact that no mention was made in relation to fee deregulation for Australian universities.

-The plenary session of the morning was delivered by Mr. Antoine van Agitmael and Mr. Fred Bakker who co-wrote a book entitled "The smartest place on Earth-Why rustbelts are emerging hotspots of global innovation". The focus of the speech examined the new 'fourth' industrial revolution which has resulted in significant job losses in western economies, particularly in the manufacturing sector. Essentially, jobs have been lost due to automation and competition, thus we have moved into a new era where one must be 'smart'. The research identified former manufacturing hubs and found that these cities were thriving as they were becoming innovation hubs. This was in contrast to previous thought and was found to be due to intelligent use of previous infrastructure to adapt to 21st century needs and demands. An example used was Akron, Ohio which was a previous manufacturing hub for rubber in the United States. The town had a significant loss of jobs and has now reemerged as a hub for polymer research. Thus they have used their existing infrastructure to adapt to 21st century needs. This is an example that Newcastle appears to be following.

-The concurrent stream I attended prior to lunch was entitled "Research collaboration and translation: some stories from the field". This session was an opportunity to showcase some examples of young researchers who had succeed in their field outside of the normal academic pathways. Some teams were working amongst industry partners and some concerns were raised in respect to IP ownership of thesis to which no one was able to provide an answer for.

-The afternoon session was entitled "What does deep Indigenous engagement look like at a university?" given jointly by Prof. Steven Larkin, University of Newcastle and Dr. Leanne Holt, Macquarie University. The talk focused on the current strategies and how they were not working. Endemic racism in the university environment was discussed as a still prevalent issue and universities have a need to recognise institutional bias. There is a need for greater indigenous focus in all aspects of the university environment and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education should fit into all models.

-The last session of the day focused on "Entrepreneurs in Action" and had an all-female panel discussing how their university education helped prepare them for their future business ventures. Of interest to NUPSA was the talk given by Ms. Erin Watson-Lynn, Director of Asialink Diplomacy, Chair, Advisory Board, NCSEHE, Co-founder, DICE Kids, who described her earlier experiences in student associations providing significant skills for future entrepreneurial ventures.

I would like to thank NUPSA and the Executive Committee for providing me the opportunity to represent students at this important conference. I wholeheartedly believe student attendance at this national decision making and advocacy body is of vital importance and would encourage all future NUPSA executive members to attend this conference, where possible.

James Pinkerton

President NUPSA