

# Universities Australia Higher Education Conference Report 2019

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## **Universities Australia Higher Education Conference 2019**

### **National Convention Centre, Canberra, 27 Feb- 29<sup>th</sup> Feb**

I attended the Universities Australia Higher Education Conference in Canberra on behalf of NUPSA for 2019. Universities Australia (UA) represents the peak University advocacy body in Australia. It is a continuation of the Australian Vice Chancellors advocacy body, and has expanded its voice outside the traditional Vice-chancellor model to include senior leaders from all Australian universities, industry leaders, government and most importantly, a small but growing student voice. NUPSA has attended UA since 2016 to develop a greater understanding of some of the key issues affecting postgraduate students across Australia and have gained valuable insights and ideas to improve our student advocacy as a result.

The theme of 2019's conference was 'Degrees of Change' which explored the role that universities play in securing Australia's prosperity, and provided opportunities to consider the social and economic contribution that universities make to society at a local, national and global level. There was a heavy focus on Industry engagement at this year's conference, and an examination of the impact of Australia's relationship with China on higher education.

Unfortunately, I had some flight issues\* on my way to the conference, and as a result (despite having scheduled my arrival for the day before) I missed the first half of Day 1 of the Conference.

I will give a brief account of the separate day's events below. When I said brief, it was my intention. But it didn't really happen that way. So have fun with that.

\*We booked flights to Canberra via Brisbane, as it was significantly cheaper. The first flight from Newcastle did not end up flying out as the plane was damaged. So, I missed my connection, and spent 5 hours waiting in Newcastle airport for the next flight to Brisbane. The airline organised accommodation in Brisbane for the night, and I was up at 6am for the next flight to Canberra! I arrived in Canberra during the lunchbreak, and commenced my conference experience after lunch. It was a long few days!

## Day 1

**Preventing Sexual Violence: Using Evidence to Guide Action** (I arrived at the end of lunch, so this was my first session).

There were four panellists in this session. UA has partnered with *Our Watch* (speaker: Patty Kinnersly), who are developing a national framework that aims to achieve a consistent and integrated national approach to prevent violence against women and their children. They focus on 'systems' that perpetuate and result in sexual violence. They have partnered with UA for the Respect and Equality Project, which has been rolled out in hundreds of schools, and will be appropriated for University campuses, producing an institutional program that will be freely and publicly available.

We then heard from the Director of the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, Krista Seddon. She shared five points:

- 1- We need a shared understanding of what 'prevention' means
- 2- We need to develop long-term strategies with different, measurable stages of implementation
- 3- We need to be able to provide immediate support for victims as well as providing support for those working towards prevention
- 4- Universities need strong relationships with local resource services, and involve students (who are the victims and those affected)
- 5- We should not water down the conceptual frameworks- this is a gendered issue and should be portrayed as such.

Thirdly we heard from the Director of Student Academic Services at the University of Wellington, NZ, Pam Thorburn. Thorburn started by condemning the poor data sharing between institutions, and the sparse, independent nature of approaches to this national issue. She also expressed concern that institutions appear to see their strategies as a status symbol rather than a humanitarian effort to ensure staff and students are safe. A collaborative approach from the VC down to each student needs to be implemented within each University, supported by the work of others. She also warned against one-off campaigns that utilise posters, single events and promotional materials. These approaches are quickly forgotten and unsustainable, and do not get to the root of the issue, which is a systematic problem. Our approach should be embedded in the curriculum, and have a strong student voice presence within it assisting in the development of tools, videos, and content.

Lastly, Angela Powditch, an alumni from Southern Cross University, spoke about how any progress must be a cultural change. She encouraged attendees to ensure students had platforms to share their ideas with VC's. She also pointed out the low level of student reporting to universities (87% do not report), and pushed for clear reporting processes and guidelines.

**Session Themes:** this calls for cultural change, cross-institutional collaboration, engagement with students and the local community.

### **Action Items/ Ideas:**

- 1- rather than Consent Matters, or in addition, there needs to be student led content embedded in the curriculum.
- 2- Ensure there are KPI's in UON's approach
- 3- Vic. Uni at Wellington had students develop a #MeToo blog. Reach out and find about this initiative. Perhaps there is something here we can replicate?
- 4- Do we have a whistleblowing policy? If so, is it used?

- 5- 'Change the Story'- it was discussed how important it is to have men involved. If this is to be a preventative, cultural strategy, then it is paramount that men have a seat at the table too. Investigate how, if at all, this is implemented at UON.
- 6- Teachers need the training to recognise struggling students, and understand how to refer to mental health and support services.
- 7- Contact Lauren Miles from Global regarding the concurrent session *Startups and Seismic Changes: Rewriting the Future of Work*.

### ***Student Panel: Perspectives on Juggling Study, Stress, and Money***

I'd like to note how disappointing that UA selected this topic of conversation for the only student panel. While these issues are incredibly important, they are known, and did not provide students opportunity to communicate other challenges. I'd have liked to hear about student perspectives on the push towards industry, new PhD's, mental health supports, and feelings about the current workforce.

Nonetheless, I took many notes.

There were four students on the panel. Mark Pace, the past President of NUS (National Union of Students) spoke about how lack of food is a real issue for students, with 1 in 7 skipping meals frequently. He also reiterated that the student funding provided by Centrelink is \$155 below the national poverty line, with no NewStar increases in the last 25 years. He called for a need for Government intervention. He also mentioned an initiative at Adelaide University, where the student association (obviously better funded than us) provides free breakfast for students twice a week, where university service staff and clubs are in attendance on rotation to chat to students.

We then heard from Kasun Kalhara from CISA (Council of International Students Australia). He talked about how students do not "live" but "survive", especially international students with the extra pressure to stay in fulltime study, and struggle with finances due to visa restrictions and difficulties in finding work. He also mentioned that summer breaks are a dangerous time for international students in terms of their mental health. Lastly, he discussed the importance of Universities running financial literacy, time management, consent workshops, and educating about plagiarism.

Julia Barton is from our own UON, and talked about her experiences doing undergraduate study whilst being an Olympian. She preached the importance of a "good lunch and a good diary" and talked a lot about time management. Her talk seemed to undermine the struggles raised by the other members of the panel, however some key ideas did seem to underly what she was saying. It is important to ensure that students maintain hobbies and interests outside of their study, to make sure they have an identity outside of their 'student' status. Their experience should be multi-faceted and build up student teams and communities.

Lastly, the President of CAPA (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations) Natasha Abrahams spoke about how the postgraduate student body have changed. With the stereotypical 'postgrad' being a mature aged, well supported individual, the increasing young people moving into postgraduate study means that an increasing amount are relying on partners and family for support. Only 20% of postgraduate coursework students are eligible to apply for Centerlink assistance, and roughly half of research students achieve scholarships. Like the NUS, she called for the government to intervene, with the issue being too significant and widespread for Universities to act alone. The best advice to Universities was to advocate on behalf of their students to government to ensure

better student support. She also recommended top-up scholarship opportunities, work on campus options, and welfare support services.

Overall, the panel was quite frustrating. There was low attendance, which I believe the topic largely contributed to, and some suggestions that were rather unfortunate coming from student representatives. CAPA represented postgraduate student well considering the topics of discussion.

#### **Action Items/ Ideas:**

- 1- Investigate more food events, though statistics show food concerns are more prevalent with undergraduates
- 2- Investigate how many events on campus occur through the summer breaks in the residencies. Does there need to be more support for postgrads living on campus at this time?
- 3- Follow up on our planned plagiarism workshops.
- 4- Investigate feasibility of compulsory first year financial literacy, time management, consent workshops with student input.

#### **Conference Dinner**

I was lucky enough to be able to attend the conference dinner at Parliament House. Prof Lisa Harvey-Smith was the MC, and spoke beautifully. She was incredibly inspiring and captured the theme of the night, which was the importance of communicating research in diverse ways, and the inspiration that access to education can bring to communities. There was an 'in conversation' with Dr Liz Allen, and Karlie Noon who is a UON graduate, and the first Indigenous Australian in NSW to complete Bachelor's in Mathematics and Science. They each spoke of their experiences as first in family graduates from regional communities, and how their achievements have impacted the towns they are from and inspired communities. We then saw the winners of the *Pitch It Clever* competition, which I found really impressive. I do believe that looking to these unique forms of communicating your research is paramount in academia today, and really spoke to the responsibility academics to connect with and help their communities with their research.

The evening got me super excited about research, and some of our ideas throughout the year to help students learn to communicate their work in different ways.

Back to accommodation at 11pm. Knackered.

#### **Day 2**

##### **Breakfast Address: Enterprise Skills and the Future of Work**

Was up at 6am for the 7am breakfast address where we heard from Andrew Charlton, Director of AlphaBeta. He spoke about the changing nature of the workforce. There has been a significant increase in the number of students working fulltime hours across multiple casual jobs during their study. These kinds of shifts in the workforce are expected, however we need to look at how we can support students through this shift until the workforce re-settles.

He also discussed the shifts in skills employers are looking for, and the need to increase education around soft skills that employers are looking for. There is a need to address the upskilling needs of the workplace, and the skills required to transition between workplaces and evolving job goals- the market is asking for digital literacy, critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork skills.

He broke this down into examining:

- 1- What we learn
  - a. Tasset skills that machines cannot learn
  - b. Skills that complement the digital age and fill the gaps that machines cannot
  - c. Broaden education
- 2- When we learn
  - a. We receive 80%of our education before the age of 21yrs. There is a need to increase learning and diversify it in later years
- 3- How we learn
  - a. Perceptions of education need to shift to include ideas of continued learning, up-skilling and skill building
  - b. Online, flexible options
  - c. Education that emphasises and builds upon tasset skills

### **Ministerial Address**

#### ***Hon Dan Tehan MP Minister for Education***

Mr Tehan spoke very briefly. He discussed the importance of teamwork and education, especially building education in regional areas and empowering smaller communities. He discussed the recent review into Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Education in Communities as only 23% of individuals in these areas have a higher education (NUPSA was given the opportunity to provide input into this review by the VC). He spoke about Australia overtaking the UK as a destination for international study, but addresses the fact that only 3% of these study in RRR communities. He seemed genuine in what he was saying, and didn't make any flowery promises, however did not discuss many of the issues we recognise with higher education.

#### ***Hon Tanya Plibersek MP Deputy Leader of the Opposition***

Ms Plibersek describes Universities as 'anchor institutions' that have real and tangible impacts on communities. She was much more political in her approach than the Minister, and frequently referred back to the upcoming election. This made her seem rather insincere at times, however she had a much more thorough understanding (or at least representation) of the many issues facing higher education. She spoke about how the Labour government will lift the caps on enrolments to improve the quality of graduates, and increase research funding. Labour will invest \$30 million into Future Fund to assist universities in producing research to benefit their communities. She spoke about the importance of universities in improving communities, and the importance that universities give back to society as a whole. She specifically talked about increasing the standard of teaching degree entrants, and putting in place better systems of support for sexual assault victims on campuses. Building on Mr Tehan's talk, she talked about the importance of improving access the higher education in RRR communities, and the upcoming 22 face-to-face study hubs in RRR areas.

To better facilitate the improvements required for RRR community education opportunities, Labour intends to appoint a Regional and Remote Commissioner to target these areas, a much more rounded solution to the review offered by the Liberal government.

She then spoke about the need to diversify the international student source countries, which was a theme that arose several times throughout the day. She introduced 13 new Terms of Reference to reform the system. I highly recommend students to watch this address.

### ***Plenary: Clever University and Industry Partners***

I am confident that the reception of this plenary would be very different depending on the viewers research discipline. There were four speakers present, and I will break their presentations down before going over the discussion briefly. The key theme of the plenary was collaboration.

*Professor Vishaal Kishore, Deputy CEO of The Actuator*

Prof Kishore started by offering the perspective that Universities produce what Industry wants- but, he says, this is not an effective strategy. He discussed the importance of a reciprocally beneficial relationship between universities and industry, and promoted the development of platforms from which universities and industry can focus on innovation and provide opportunity. Echoing earlier sessions, he spoke about the fragmentation of approaches preventing cohesive action, and how these mutual platforms should be considered and strategic to create an ecosystem of collaborative research. These could be based at the university, or in industry where the university acts as a present and co-operative body, bridging the gaps between development and execution. He pushed to proceed with commercialisation, and finished with 5 lessons:

- Collaborations should address the problems and needs of both parties
- Always collaborate, never duplicate
- Should not be a simple, transactional relationship
- The initial collaboration will feel uncomfortable, and “hurt just a bit”
- “come play with us”

*Ms Ruma Balasubramanian, Chief Transformation Officer Asia Pacific, Japan & China, CISCO*

Also emphasised mutually beneficial collaboration, Eg: where Industry gets problem solving talent, and students get work experience opportunities (there was no mention of paid work or compensation for these services). Ms Balasubramanian also mentioned how the process of commercialising research and ideas needs to happen much faster, and universities needed to start thinking of themselves as digital businesses. They need to be good at:

- Continuous and experiential learning
- New horizons in research
- A role in innovation ecosystems
- Meeting student expectations (digital natives)
- Addressing the rise of entrepreneurship and the subsequent need for soft skills- more than ½ or new Australian business is affiliated/ started through affiliation with Universities

She spoke a lot about cyber and tech collaborations specifically. She ended by saying that success in collaboration is dependent on trust, honesty, and diversification (bringing Industry in through multiple facets).

*Mr John Paitaridis, CEO Optus Business*

Mr Paitaridis spoke about the impact of technology on industry, and the ‘anytime anywhere’ mentality when everything is expected to be digital first. There are new job roles emerging as a result, meaning that industry is at a point where industry *needs* academia and a collaborative approach. There was a lot of talk about Universities building new degrees and courses to fill industry jobs (which spoke to the concerning idea of universities as worker factories), specifically those in cyber security and the tech industry.

*Ms Tania Constable PSM, CEO Minerals Council of Australia*

Ms Constable started by emphasising that education is the key to progress and innovation. 1/5 of mining workforce is educated with a degree or higher, as productivity growth is slowing, there is an increasing need for industry to partner with universities. She reflected earlier speakers about the changing nature of required skills, and how education must become more flexible and adapt to industry requirements. There is an identified need for better trust, culture and image, awareness of the relevance of degrees, skills and compatibility with the workforce, pathways, and storytelling about people entering industry. Industry needs to work with Universities (and visa versa) to design degrees and placements to suit specific jobs, updated for the changing workforce.

In a large-scale review, they found that 42% of jobs needed enhancement for efficiency, 35% needed redesigning and 15% needed automation. She echoed the need to build and improve soft skills, specifically problem solving, decision making, active listening and instructing, and making judgements). She was the only one to really mention benefits to students and mentioned a quadripartite approach between universities, students and industry.

### *Questions*

It became clear during the questions that industry interest -- at least those reflected by the panel -- are mining, health, education and agriculture. Industry called for universities to develop teams to specifically develop programs to appeal to industry and reach out. The discussion was extremely promising for several industries particularly, however there was a question waiting on the board asking about the role of the Humanities and Social Sciences and the arts in the push towards industry. The question gained popularity in the room for quite a while before it was addressed.

The response was extremely disappointing, with the panel pushing responsibility back onto Universities to demonstrate the importance and relevance of these disciplines. While it was assured that "the arts deserve a seat at the table", it was put to the audience to envision what that might look like. The panel acknowledged that the ethics of technological advancement and AI were important, as well as behavioural, sociological of behaviour of technology, and STEM, but that industry should adapt in order see HASS actively contributing to industry development. A good lesson that came out of this discussion however, was that *HASS and the arts need to learn the language of industry*. They are an untapped source of innovation, but industry is unsure how to integrate these disciplines into industry. The panel posed that it is a matter of job creation, and the question is how to give industry impact in a way that is inclusive to all disciplines?

They finished talking about the importance of scalability, and long-term application of collaboration methods- 'industry has a short memory'. Trust, the quality of the relationship, growth, and the improvement of acceleration are key focuses.

### ***Action Items/ Ideas:***

- 1- There needs to be even more emphasis for communicating research on multiple platforms, as well as helping students in building entrepreneurial skills
- 2- I'd be interested to investigate student reception of the push towards industry with specific focus on reception in different disciplines to ensure all student can see where they fit into the future workplace.

### ***International education 4:0 The New Geopolitics of Higher Education***

This session asked panellists the questions: "in a post-truth, post-Brexit world can the US and the UK remain pre-eminent in Higher Education? What does this, and a rising Asia, mean for Australia in global education?"

*Professor Nick Bisley*

Said that the US would take over Australia in the export of energy. He also argued that post-truth as not a real thing- while R&D expenditure in the US was proposed to be cut by 3%, it was ultimately increased by 12%, much of which has gone into energy research, meaning that faith in research is not lost. China is being reassessed as a major global competitor by the US, and this move is unrelated to Trump's presidency. The US pays advanced international and domestic students to complete PhD out of the R&D budget, tuition and living allowances included, and these are not limited to the 3.5 year completion time seen in Australia. They are investing in research, and China recognises this investment.

*Dr Merriden Varrell*

She discussed how China and Chinese students are incredibly important to Australia. She made the point that China has been post-truth for a very long time via their patriotic education campaign since the 80's. This propaganda includes influence over where Chinese students chose to study, and Australia needs to recognise that Chinese country, politics, and peoples are all in the same family. It was made clear that insults to China is perceived as an insult to the Chinese people, and the West has been perceived as bullying China since the opium wars in the 1800's. However, the West also has a reputation of prestige in terms of the education it offers.

Chinese students learn by Rote, and intense pressure is placed on students to support their families and be successful. International connections and reputation is paramount. This means that the best options for Chinese students have been Ivy League schools in the US, and the equivalent in the UK. However, overseas study is becoming less prestigious due to the increase in international graduates and the increasing reputation of China's own institutions. There has been a significant shift in the way foreigners and the west are viewed, with a 7% drop in enrolments of Chinese students attributed to bi-lateral tensions. Dr Varrell said for Australian Universities to remain viable options for Chinese students, Australian uni's need to tailor their international student experience to specifically address student needs, E.g.: Chinese students place great emphasis on work experience opportunities.

*Professor Simon Jackman*

Prof Jackman started by explaining why the current climate appears so unsettling. After the Cold War, we entered 4 decades of geo-political stability, and as a result neoliberal complacency settled in. As the risks remained low, this informed our understanding of the climate, and we never considered the possible dangers of increasing our collaboration with China in terms of its systematic challenges. China and India are seeing simultaneous growth alongside the West, and the Asia geopolitical players, unlike the west, are not liberal.

He continued by saying that a return to neo-liberal systems is unlikely and higher education in Australia must adapt as a result of this shift. Asia is beginning to trade in English, meaning that our language acquisition edge is reduced whilst we are only already the third favourite higher education destination for most of Asia.

Prof Jackman warned that Australian Universities are becoming complacent in our role in creating, defending and communicating truth (in reference to the post-truth question) and identified a need for Universities to take steps to advocate for our authority in terms of research.

*Discussion*

Emphasised the importance re-establishing responsibility around truth-telling. The difference between now and in the past is that there is little shame in communicating untruths. Asking why University research is so ignored by the general population comes down to the inferiority of our communication platforms against popular media. Audiences want a simple solution that feels real, not uncomfortable, intangible truths (Eg: climate change). Popular media is more likely to promote negative research results, and/or redactions of results, representation of dire futures, and criticism, adding to the lack of faith in academic discourse. There needs to be an increase in the positive communication of research. There is a turn in the young population for access to and desire for education, a group who are less prone to believing 'false truths'. There are potential risks in self-censoring, and whilst there can be backlash, it is important that Australian universities remain defenders of truth, unswayed by political propaganda or government-influenced discourse. Lastly, they identified a need for Australia to diversify its international entrants, looking to Africa and Brazil.

### ***Action Items/Ideas***

- 1- A forum for good-news academic stories that can assist student in building positive academic profiles with relatable voices
- 2- Student/staff feedback process doesn't work. Universities already know this. Perhaps a nominate-your-favourite system may work better with prizes for incentives?
- 3- There is a complex issue around students from rote learning background studying in Australia. Trinity College in Melbourne has a compulsory language, drama, philosophy course to teach all students communication and independent thinking. How can we help student coming to Australia with rote learning backgrounds develop the soft skill required for Australian education and the current workforce?

### ***Plenary: Our Transforming Region: Contextualising the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)***

*Associate Professor Jane Golley, Acting Director Australian Centre on China and the World*

Prof Golley spoke about the Belt and Road Initiative as a Chinese Infrastructure project, including that China wants to be a power in Higher Education. She asked the questions:

What are the motivations and impacts of China's new foreign policy initiative- is it a multi-dimensional policy document, or is it a geopolitical strategy?

How much is to do with domestic issues and how much is to make a global impact? Is it malevolent, or benevolent?

Regarding higher education, if BRI succeeds, we would see the increasing demand for students to Australia impacted by China's growing presence in the higher education sphere. This could be prevented through our current bi-lateral relationship with China. She said we much improve our international co-operation with China on BRI, whilst challenging where we need to (ie: regarding academic freedom).

*Professor Hugh White AO, Strategic Defence Studies Centre*

Prof White broke his talk down to three main points:

- 1- We need to take BRI seriously, because it is important to China, and we must adapt to a changing world

- 2- Education is incredibly relevant to BRI. For China, infrastructure is heavily invested in connectivity, and the Chinese Education minister has their own BRI plan.
- 3- It is complicated, with potential risks, challenges and opportunities for Australia. BRI has attracted 65% of China's international students, all from BRI countries. It is a portal of soft power, where academics and industry are supported by BRI. It is an open initiative, with Victoria signing the BRI MOU, however education is not represented here. Prof White said it is very important that we create links between Australian higher education and BRI in the MOU and remain supportive.

*Mr Peter Cai, non-resident Fellow, Lowy Institute*

Mr Cai started by saying that BRI is a 'totem' in how we think about China and its evolution. It represents much more than infrastructure, and it is how we must now define China's role in the world, economically and strategically. He claimed that we have grown used to China's growth, and as a result, have not seen how significant BRI actually is for Australia, with China's GDP to double that of America within the next 10 years.

Our place in the Asia-Pacific is mediated by those in power, and we must ask what China's rise means for Australia; a question that at this stage we can't answer. Past relationships have been mediated by ally nations and cultural similarities, but China are not technically Australia's ally, and we do not have cultural similarities. This is an entirely new situation for Australia, and until we acknowledge the scale of this change and debate what it means, we cannot begin to answer the posed questions.

Universities and government must ask how to take into account national interests that consider not only jobs and growth internally, but also with mind to our global position in the Asia-Pacific. An advantage of studying in Australia for many international students is in the opportunity to explore academic freedom. We have an academic environment that necessitates grappling with big questions, debating ideas, and thinking critically. We also have the responsibility to maintain that advantage, ensuring Australian higher education is a place for robust debate.

Currently 10 of the top 50 Science and Technology universities in the world are Chinese- only 1 is Australian. China produced more scientific research in 2018 than the US, and Australia must engage. The US is already working closely with China.

After this session, I had to leave to catch my flight back, thus missing the closing Plenary, *The Robots Are Coming! Here's How to Outsmart Them* which I was rather disappointed to miss. Regardless, I found this to be surprisingly beneficial for NUPSA, and it gave an interesting and valuable perspective of the broader context in which UON postgraduate students are studying. I came away with several ideas to help our student prepare for themselves for the future workplace, as well as several larger initiatives that I hope to advocate for into the rest of this year.

Thank you for allowing me to attend on your behalf, and again, apologies for all the detail in the report!