

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY AS A BEACON OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Thank you Auntie Sandra Lee for your warm welcome to country.

As the Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney I begin by reflecting on the hand of hospitality you have extended.

I acknowledge the Aboriginal custodians and traditional owners of the land on which the six campuses of our university are located. The Daruk, Gandangarra and Tharawal peoples lived on the plains and camped by the rivers of this land for at least 300 centuries. I pay my respect to their elders past and present for caring for this country.

I am overwhelmed by the scale and significance of 1200 generations of history. But I, and the University I respect, are also aware of the depth and dimensions of the problems that confront Aboriginal Australians in Greater Western Sydney today. We willingly shoulder the responsibility of contributing, through education, to a better and brighter future.

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) has a distinctive and emerging mission. We are, in a real sense, an open university. We seek, in a myriad of ways, to make ourselves accessible to students who would not traditionally have enjoyed all that a university has to offer.

We are proud of our commitment to social justice and equal opportunity. We accept more students from low income families than any other university in Australia. We are just as proud of the quality of the education we deliver. That, too, is central to the goal of social inclusion.

We are delighted to provide a chance for so many Australians who were born overseas - and who speak a language other than English with their family – to climb the ladder of economic success and social mobility. Unusually we have far more Australian residents born overseas studying at UWS than we have overseas students.

We are equally pleased to provide a second chance for those Australians who recognise the value of university education only later in life. No-one should find themselves limited by the decisions they made when they are young.

Perhaps most fundamentally we seek to make UWS a beacon of hope for the 30,000 Indigenous Australians who call Western Sydney home – both the Daruk people and the many thousands of Aboriginal people who have migrated to this region from country New South Wales and beyond. They moved here in search of opportunity. It is our imperative to help provide it.

It is too often unrecognised that the campuses of UWS straddle the largest single Aboriginal community in Australia outside the Northern Territory. It is a young community: 59 per cent are under 25 years of age. It is remarkably resilient but profoundly disadvantaged.

This is our challenge – symbolised by the fact that while around 5 per cent of NSW jobseekers are unemployed, the equivalent figure for the state's Indigenous population is four times larger.

This is our opportunity – represented by almost 500 students and 50 staff who learn, teach and work on our campuses. They are supported by the University’s Badanami Centre and, most importantly, by the Aboriginal Elders who provide us with advice and encouragement.

UWS believes that education, training and employment are the key to economic and social success for Indigenous Australians. It is the route out of demoralising and disempowering welfare dependence. It is the cornerstone of self-reliance, self-respect and pride in families and community.

That’s why UWS, collectively, and I, personally, have been so heartened by working in partnership with GenerationOne over the last year. We are honoured to host this important event. The objectives of our two organisations are closely aligned.

We share a belief in creating real and sustainable career pathways for Indigenous Australians, built upon lifelong learning. We both recognise the need to work closely with employers, training providers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to fulfil that ambition.

To all of you attending today’s’ panel discussion, welcome to UWS. Together we can be part of building a more just and equitable society.

This address was given by the Chancellor, Professor Peter Shergold AC, at the launch of the GenerationOne forum hosted by the University at its Parramatta campus on 19 August 2011