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IN DEFENCE OF EXPERTISE

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VC'S SPEAKING NOTES

Just a short drive from here, in the spectacular bushland around our nation's capital, stands a collided rock shelter known as Birrigai.

This ancient site at Tidbinbilla – and precious ochre artworks in the nearby Namadgi National Park – remind us that this land has been home to the first people of this region for tens-of-thousands of years.

They connect every Australian who visits them to the vast span of our country's history.

As do the names themselves.

In the language of the Ngunnawal people, the word 'Jedbinbilla' means a place where boys were made men. Birrigai translates as 'laughter' or 'to laugh'.

The traditional owners of this region, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and the clans from further afield who came here to trade and marry and take part in ceremonies – the Ngarigo, the Wolgalu, the Gundungurra, the Yuin and the Wiradjuri – have cared for this country, curated this country and loved this country for millennia.

I acknowledge this as I pay my respects to you, and to your Elders past and present.

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We live in challenging times.

Ours is an era in which evidence, intellectual inquiry and expertise are under sustained attack.

The phrases ‘post truth’ and ‘alternative facts’ have slipped into common use.

Agendas have displaced analysis in much of our public debate. And we are all the poorer for it. So today, I want to deliver a passionate defence of the value of expertise and evidence.

I will mount a case for facts as they are grounded in evidence, not as fluid points of convenience employed to cover or distort a proposition.

My plea to you all is this: let’s not deride experts, nor the value of expertise.

Because in an era where extremists and polemicists seek to claim more and more of the public square, our need for unbiased, well-researched information has seldom been greater.

We must remind ourselves of how human progress has ever been forged. In this, academics and journalists have common cause.

For how are we to fulfill our respective roles in a democracy if we don’t defend the indispensable role of evidence in decision-making?

In Australia and around the world, we’ve seen the emergence of a creeping cynicism – even outright hostility – towards evidence and expertise.

We saw this sentiment in the post-Brexit declaration by British Conservative MP, Michael Gove that “the people of this country have had enough of experts”.

And yet – as we strive to cure cancer; save lives from preventable disease; navigate disruption; lift living standards; overcome prejudice, and prevent catastrophic climate change – expertise has never been more important.

The turn that public debate has taken is a challenge to universities.

As institutions for the public good, we exist to push the frontiers of knowledge.

We enhance human understanding through methodical, collaborative, sustained and robust inquiry.

That doesn’t discount the wisdom of the layperson.

And it doesn’t mean universities have all the answers. Far from it. But we are unequivocally the best places to posit the questions.

We are places structurally, intellectually, ethically and intrinsically premised on confronting society’s most complex and confounding problems.

We are at the vanguard of specialist knowledge. And we are relentless in its pursuit. We have to be.

Because – like the challenges we as institutions immerse ourselves in – the pace of change is unrelenting.

In universities, questioning is continuous, and answers are always provisional.

The intensive specialisation, in-depth inquiry and measured analysis universities undertake is not carried-out in service of some ulterior motive or finite agenda.

In the conduct of research the finish-line is very rarely, if ever reached. There's always more to learn, more to discover.

The core objectives universities pursue can never be about any other agenda than the truth. There is no other, nor greater reward.

So let's not disparage expertise, or the critically important role of evidence and intellectual inquiry.

Instead, let's try to understand its value to our country and its people. And, indeed, to the world.

Universities perform an essential role in society.

We must stand up for evidence. Stand up for facts. Stand up for the truth. Because if we don't, who will?

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While I'm at the ramparts, I want to turn to another crucial role universities carry out in this era of alienation.

It is a role that goes to the heart of economic opportunity and social cohesion.

Disruption is drastically refashioning the economy. It is reshaping the way we work, and reimagining the way we engage with each other in our local communities and globally.

In this constantly transforming environment – where major structural shifts in the economy can profoundly dislocate large segments of society – our universities perform a pivotal role.

Universities help us make the very best of disruption, ensuring we are able to 'ride the wave'. And they are the institutions best equipped to buffer us against the fallout.

This is particularly important in regions that have relied for decades on large-scale blue-collar industries.

Think Geelong in regional Victoria and Mackay in central Queensland. Look to Elizabeth in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. Wollongong and Newcastle in New South Wales. And Launceston in Tasmania.

Onetime manufacturing strongholds in carmaking, steel, timber and sugar.

These communities have been wrenched economically, socially and at the personal level by automation, offshoring and rationalisation.

For places like these, universities can be a lifeline. Internationally, the evidence is in. Former financier, Antoine van Agtmael and journalist, Fred Bakker look at this very scenario in their recent book, *The Smartest Places on Earth*.

They uncover a transformative pattern in more than 45 formerly struggling regional US and European economies; places they describe as ‘rustbelts’ turned ‘brainbelts’.

Akron, Ohio is one of the most remarkable examples they cite. This midwestern city had four tyre companies disappear practically overnight.

The then president of the University of Akron, Luis Proenza, reached out to those affected, rallying them to collaborate and encouraging them to transform.

Van Agtmael, who will speak at the Universities Australia conference tomorrow, tells the story of what happened next.

“What stayed in Akron”, he observes, “was the world class polymer research that has given us things like contact lenses that change colour if you have diabetes, tyres that can drive under all kinds of road conditions and hundreds more inventions.”

Akron, he continues, “now [has] 1,000 little polymer companies that have more people working for them than the four old tyre companies.”

This kind of transformation, at Akron and beyond, Van Agtmael remarks, is “university centric.”

“Each of these rustbelts becoming brain belts”, he concludes, “always have universities.”

In places like those he describes, and many others around the world, universities and their graduates are leading vital processes of renewal within economies experiencing upheaval.

You may be surprised by the extent that this is happening in Australia, too.

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Over the past decade, the startup economy has become part of Australia’s strategy for

economic diversification and growth.

Yet what has not been widely understood is the extent to which universities and their graduates are responsible for that growth.

Now, for the first time, Universities Australia and the survey group Startup Muster have taken a closer look at the data.

It's my great pleasure to launch that report today.

Startup Smarts: Universities and the startup economy, confirms that universities and their graduates are the driving force in Australia's startup economy.

It tells us that four-in-five startup founders in this country are university graduates.

Many startups, too, have been nurtured into existence by a university incubator, accelerator, mentoring scheme or entrepreneurship course.

There are more than one-hundred of these programs dispersed widely across the country, with many on regional campuses.

They provide support, physical space and direct access to the latest research.

They help to grow great Australian ideas into great Australian businesses.

This report confirms just how important the constant evolution, renewal and refining of course offerings at universities is.

We need to ensure that our programs equip our students and graduates for an uncertain future.

By the time today's kindergarten students finish high school and are considering university study, startups will have created over half-a-million new jobs across the country.

And this new sector of the economy – a sector indivisible from our universities – raised \$568 million in 2016; 73 per cent more than the previous year.

By the very nature of the reach of our universities, the benefits are not confined to our cities.

We play a vital role to help regional Australians and farmers stake their claim in the startup economy too.

The idea of the 'silicon paddock' – using technology to take farm-based businesses to the markets of the world – is no longer a concept. It's a reality.

Technology enables our regional entrepreneurs to stay in our regions; building and running businesses, investing locally without the need for long commutes or city relocations.

And this, too, is very important; making sure nobody is left behind.

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Spreading opportunity fairly is an imperative for Australian universities. I want to share with you the story of Karlie Noon. She's a young Kamilaroi woman from near Tamworth.

Karlie was the first in her family to go to university when she began a combined maths and physics degree at the University of Newcastle eight years ago.

She's been working ever since to identify and understand more about the sophisticated scientific knowledge embedded in Indigenous astronomy.

Karlie has sifted through early European settler accounts of Indigenous stories about moon haloes.

For the first Australians, those rings around the moon were storm predictors.

In her area of expertise – published for wider Australia to share – Karlie is teaching us more about the history of our own country.

And, she has an important message for other young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“You're a natural scientist,” she tells them. “Don't ever doubt that. It's in you. It's in your culture. We are so special. And we are so unique. Be proud of that. Do whatever you want.”

What a powerful message of inspiration and cultural pride.

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Tonight, in Parliament House, Universities Australia will launch a new Indigenous strategy.

And we will honour some of the many trailblazers who forged a path into universities for Australia's first peoples.

The late, Dr Margaret Williams-Weir; the very much still living, Lloyd McDermott; the late, great, Charles Perkins, and many others.

The goal of this strategy is to drive further gains in university participation by

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Crucially, we embark on this commitment in partnership with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium.

For it is only through Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians working side-by-side, in genuine partnership, that we can make real headway.

And progress is sorely needed.

Just two weeks ago, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull delivered the annual *Closing the Gap* report.

As a reflection on how we are tracking in redressing shocking disparities in health, education, employment and life expectancy, it makes for sobering reading.

On some measures, heartbreakingly, we have gone backwards. One point, however, gave cause for optimism.

"The higher the level of education," the Prime Minister noted, "the smaller the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment."

Even more encouragingly: "For tertiary-educated Indigenous people," he remarked, "there is no gap."

This statistic affirms something that most of us know instinctively. Education transforms lives.

Australian universities now have 74 per cent more Indigenous undergraduate students than in 2008.

And yet while Indigenous people make up 2.7 per cent of Australia's working age population, they account for only 1.6 per cent of university students.

As a matter of both equity and excellence, Australia needs to draw on the talents of all its people.

Tonight, UA's member universities will commit to expand their contributions to practical measures which:

- close the gap in disadvantage;
- lift the visibility of Indigenous expertise, excellence and contributions to Australia;
- acknowledge and support the rights, languages and cultures of Indigenous communities;
- tackle racism; and
- promote equal opportunity and outcomes for all Australians.

We will set ourselves clear targets to achieve some very specific goals. The objectives are clear.

On **participation**: we will maintain an Indigenous student growth rate that is at least 50 per cent above the growth rate of non- Indigenous enrolments, and ideally 100 per cent above.

On **retention**: we will implement measures to ensure that by 2025, Indigenous students achieve the same success rates by field as domestic non-Indigenous students.

And on **completion**: we will work to achieve equal student completion rates – by field of study – by 2028.

These are ambitious targets and they may not be easy to achieve. But lack of ambition, lack of commitment on this front is not an option.

We need the skills and talents the First Australians bring to our universities.

And we need to ensure that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person with the ambition and ability to go to university can see a pathway in.

Tracing that pathway back, 50 years or so, we are reminded of the gravity of the responsibility we have to afford everyone this opportunity.

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I mentioned Charles Perkins earlier. Any attempt I have made to articulate the scale of the challenge we face, is eclipsed the ability he had – not simply to point-out inequity – but to make us feel it in our guts.

Interviewed for the *Australian Biography* project, Perkins recalled his contribution to a campus debate, I think, in the mid-to-late sixties.

I quote:

“We had a big debate on the *Freedom Ride*: should we get in the swim or not. [When] we broke into the pools at Moree Baths... and opened them up for everybody to swim... [there] was a ban on swimming by blacks in the pool.”

“And so”, Perkins continues, “the debate topic was: should we get into the swim. That was [at] the Union, Sydney University Union. So everybody turned up”, he added, “hundreds and hundreds and thousands turned up to the debate. Couldn’t get in the place. Couldn’t get in myself”, he quips.

Perkins goes on. "Well I took [the topic] literally... I was arguing in the literal sense: should we get into the swim. Oh, it was ridiculous. But I won the debate."
End quote.

Charlie Perkins was a brilliant intellect. And, a brilliant debater.

The answer to the debate topic was a given. It was how he engaged the question that counted.

That approach, *writ large* was what changed minds, altered viewpoints, built national momentum for change.

Perkins crystallised the nature of the injustice Aboriginal Australians faced, not by having all the answers but by scrutinising the questions.

He decried the absurdity of the circumstance, the assumptions, the structure that supported prejudice in this country.

Facts or evidence are essential parts of this approach but I put it to you that they aren't always the headline element.

It's how we approach the question that counts. The right answers will come as a matter of consequence, not force.

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This is one of my last major speeches before I step down as Chair of Universities Australia in May.

So allow me to take a moment to outline some of the policy questions we've faced, and continue to confront.

Over the past few years, UA has clearly explained the benefits for Australia of a well-resourced, stable and quality-focused university sector.

Our *Keep It Clever* campaign now has almost 45,000 Facebook supporters.

And nearly 30,000 people have signed our petition seeking secure funding for university education and research.

The campaign has helped more Australians to join-the-dots about the many inventions, innovations and services they depend on that were created or enabled by Australia's universities.

- IVF? Developed by an Australian university.
- The cervical cancer vaccine, Gardasil? Developed by an Australian university.

- An improved bowel-cancer early detection test?
- The world's largest parenting support program?
- Spray-on solar panels?

All developed by Australian universities.

The list is extensive. It's nothing short of inspiring.

Notwithstanding the policy and funding uncertainty in which we have operated, our universities remain Australia's third-largest export.

Educating international students now brings a staggering \$21.8 billion into Australia each year.

So we have an extra financial incentive beyond providing the very best quality education to our own country's current and next generations.

We must ensure that any higher education policy and funding decisions do not damage the enormous benefits the sector affords us as a nation.

Across government, industry, our universities and the community, recognition has grown that the strength of our universities is inexorably connected to the strength of our economy.

People get it.

They understand the link.

You can't have one without the other.

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Let me return to where I began today.

Comprehending and overcoming the complex problems the world confronts, in my view, requires we defend the role of expertise and intellectual inquiry.

That doesn't mean universities are the last word on knowledge.

To a large extent, it means rethinking the way knowledge is conveyed beyond university gates.

If universities don't turn their minds to this issue, others will. And their motivations may not always be altruistic.

Contemplating this problem, Czech author, Milan Kundera wrote of the purge of hundreds of university academics by the Soviet installed regime after the 1968 Prague

Spring.

This act, he posed, was part of a state sponsored drive of ‘forgetting’; one by which Party-sanctioned truths replaced all others.

The totalitarian world was, in Kundera’s view, a world based on answers, on absolutes.

The Party was put forward as the solution to both real and imagined problems.

Confronting this absurdity, he observed “the stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything.”

In contrast, Kundera concluded, “the wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything.”

This is the very same wisdom Perkins championed.

And, current circumstances globally have me thoroughly convinced that this approach has never been more necessary.

The voice universities contribute to public debate must resonate with that questioning imperative.

The approach I’m talking about must inhabit the core business of universities.

Take research, for instance.

When the facts of a particular field of inquiry are under attack, the natural reaction among researchers might be to tighten-up their retort and hone the theoretical armory.

It is right to be rigorous and methodical in research.

But in the broader communication of our research – in the public dialogue beyond ‘the lab’ – I think universities have to guard against retreating to overly technical language that, perhaps inadvertently, sidelines all but a limited group of specialists.

I don’t suggest that research can’t benefit or even be improved via a researcher’s consciousness of a particular, often very specific audience.

Yet researchers who allow this consciousness to dominate the development of their work risk undermining their ability to tread new ground and challenge existing frontiers of knowledge.

Only by crossing borders can we come to something new.

How many researchers’ discoveries have arisen from a subversion of discipline,

practice or establishment? Virtually all, I would suggest.

Crossing borders also means we push other structural boundaries. Within universities, distinct discipline paradigms exist for good reason. They bring focus and in-depth intellectual lineage to a particular field.

But, increasingly, the complex problems we set out to solve don't abide by the same boundaries.

These questions demand expertise from many disciplines, working together and approaching the subject matter from different angles.

That is why universities are constantly refining their research and teaching programs and, increasingly, diffusing the borders that kept many of them separate.

This is good for universities. It is good for the country. And it is good for our students, many of whom find their way into public service or politics.

These graduates bring a greater understanding of all facets of the complex questions they confront throughout their working lives.

Interdisciplinarity is, I think, a powerful antidote against ideological intransigence and prejudice.

Australian universities – particularly in their research – have a growing track-record in this regard.

Many of our very best research institutes are characterised by a fusion of disciplines where, for example, sociologists, political scientists, spatial geographers, and economists collaborate on a common research objective.

The work that emerges from this research is almost always compelling because it is multi-faceted.

It extends itself beyond its constituent research community.

Cross-disciplinarity has also expanded at the teaching level of our universities over the past few decades.

But a constrained funding environment can provoke a reduction in options.

We must, however, keep our viewfinder broad, because reductionism doesn't match the expansionist, multi-strand trends emerging in the broader economy.

It's a disconnect.

As universities, as a society, we must be mindful of how important it is to ask

questions, to follow our curiosity, to challenge boundaries and to never rest with the answers.

Which leads me to my final reflection today.

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A few weeks ago, I attended a ceremony marking Sir David Attenborough's naming as a lifetime patron of the Australian Museum.

He gave a talk lasting less than ten minutes but of infinite resonance.

He addressed the audience with trademark humility. Referring to the genus of Tasmanian snail anointed in his honour, he joked about his difficulty in pronouncing his own name.

He spoke wide-eyed of how when European scientists first came to Australia they saw things that "blew their minds".

With this seemingly distracted aside, he deftly illustrated just how critical the museum is in "chronicling" scientific uniqueness.

It was his infectious sense of excitement; his capacity to go off-topic, to surprise, to dwell not on answers but to subsume us all in questions that had the room utterly entranced.

The Museum's Trust President, Catherine Livingstone rightly observed of Sir David, "There is no one else – you have no peer."

It's impossible to argue with that statement.

Nobody has singlehandedly done so much to raise awareness of the natural world and influence our interaction with it.

It must be obvious to you that his address struck a chord with me. But it was more than the words.

It was the unabashed sense of inclusiveness and intellectual curiosity he reminded me of.

That's what hit home.

Those traits were with me as a kid in Geelong, for whom university seemed a distant and, at times, impossible pathway.

In a world where those precious traits seem to be in dwindling supply – a world where they are increasingly derided and dismissed – we must hold a light to them whenever they appear.

This is the beacon that universities are and should always be.

They are places shaped through their capacity to question and ideally overcome to the most bedeviling and complex problems.

But, at their heart, they must be places where everyone who has the desire to follow their curiosity is inspired and encouraged to do so.

Thank you.