

Rethinking Sydney from the West: The Transformative Potential of Education

Speech by Peter Shergold, Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney

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To rethink Sydney we need to re-imagine its west – to envisage not just what its future might be but how that might be achieved. Even more fundamentally we need to re-imagine and re-articulate Sydney *from* the west.

This much we know: Greater Western Sydney will expand at around 2% per annum from some 2 million residents today to almost 3 million in 25 years time.

This much we fear: that demographic growth will not be matched by the region's economic development, social cohesion, civic engagement or cultural participation. If that dystopian future were to eventuate, growth would simply reinforce the urban inequality which already exists.

The danger is that if we keep on doing what we've always done, we'll always get what we always got. If we don't rethink creatively, plan strategically and implement with determination then the economic prospects of western Sydney we will continue to be blighted by the decline of manufacturing, unplanned urban sprawl and relatively low average standards of income, skill and education. Too many of its people will remain dependent on commuting long distances to jobs or recreation in the CBD. The region's rich history and contemporary diversity will in popular perceptions be undermined by media images of welfare dependence, cultural deprivation and crime.

If Parramatta, and the other urban centres of western Sydney, are to reach their potential it will certainly require substantial public and private investment in economic and social infrastructure - from transport and residential housing to schools, hospital and cultural institutions. It will also depend upon the creation of new employment opportunities in emerging industries that require technical, professional and research skills.

Of course, success cannot be measured by buildings and businesses alone. Any renaissance of western Sydney will not just be apparent in the concrete symbols of prosperity - networks of roads and rail lines, shopping malls and industrial precincts, housing estates and parkland, sporting stadiums and art galleries. Less visible, but equally important, the transformation of western Sydney will have been brought about by significant and sustained investment in the region's human capital.

We need to re-think the development of Parramatta and west in terms of education. We need to make Greater Western Sydney smart. We need to invest in people.

It is quite wrong to stereotype western Sydney in negative terms. There are areas of affluence as well as pockets of second-generation welfare dependence, prosperity as much as disadvantage. If we are to fully comprehend the barriers that impede the region's economic growth, however, it's important to recognise its aggregate characteristics. GWS is younger, more poorly skilled, less well educated and has less English spoken at home than elsewhere in Sydney.

The danger is not that the region lacks a strong work ethic: the range of small and medium enterprises bears testimony to the entrepreneurial drive of self-employed contractors and business proprietors. The risk, rather, is that poorly educated families may be less likely to aspire to formal skills acquisition, vocational training or higher education for their children.

This is an obstacle to regional development. Investment in education provides significant rewards not only to the individual but also to society. Educated workers are more likely to have higher incomes, face fewer periods of unemployment and enjoy greater career prospects. The society in which they work achieves higher levels of workforce participation and greater productivity. Too often forgotten in the instrumentalist calculation of value, society also benefits from a more engaged, civic-minded and self-reliant community exhibiting more pro-social behaviours. An educated population will create a more civil society.

Education builds networks of social capital. It is the key to re-thinking the future of western Sydney. A skilled workforce will persuade more corporations to establish their offices in the region. It will provide a magnet for new high level manufacturing and service industries.

I should, of course, declare my interest. I am the Chairman of the Board of one of the largest businesses in western Sydney. It employs around 4,000 people on six sites. It has assets of \$1.6 billion (80% in property) and has an annual income of about \$550 million. It invests heavily in research. It also has 38,000 students, which number is projected to rise to about 50,000 in 2020. That business is more usually called the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

A recent report by Deloitte Access Economics has measured, in very conservative terms, the economic contribution of UWS to its region. The estimate is that the University is responsible, through its wages, operating surplus and activities, for an annual output of \$845 million. Its total employment contribution is 8,805 full-time equivalent jobs. In summary, UWS represents approximately 1% of the Gross Regional Product.

It's because of my position at UWS that I can present you with two other vital facts. First, very many GWS students, given a chance, would prefer to have their vocational or higher education delivered in western Sydney. Indeed UWS is increasingly the first preference of local applicants for university. Second, once educated, most students, if opportunities existed, would prefer to work and raise their families in western Sydney. These two truths represent both a significant challenge and a remarkable opportunity.

How is the region to be given the educational opportunities on which its future economic prosperity depends? My perspective, naturally, is from that of UWS. It's a single university covering a 9,000 square kilometre area extending from Parramatta in the east to Hawkesbury, Campbelltown and Penrith in the west. It serves a fast-expanding region in which 1 in every 11 Australian lives. I am proud of what we contribute. Nevertheless the remarks that follow will make it clear that UWS represents just one important part of the answer.

If the people of GWS are to have the same educational outcomes as the rest of Sydney, tertiary education in the region will need to meet five criteria.

One, **accessibility**. The mission of UWS is to be an open and welcoming university in which a large number of students can become the first generation in their family to enrol for a degree.

Contrary to some recent public commentary, widening the opportunity for students is not concomitant with lowering educational standards. Just as a good employer knows that a productive and stable workforce depends on both recruitment and retention, so a good university knows that its success is a function both of entry and graduation.

The key, in which UWS invests heavily, is to provide the support services which allow less qualified (and often less privileged) students to develop and benefit from their education. UWS now has more lower socio-economic status students than any other Australian university. They encompass 23% of student intake (and 30% of the students who come from western Sydney). Two thirds of our GWS students have parents without a university qualification. One-third speak a language other than English at home.

The good news is that they are as likely to succeed as their better off counterparts, in large part because of the support that is offered. Once they graduate, they climb the ladder of opportunity equally fast.

Educational innovation is the key to success. The university has established UWSCollege. It allows students to undertake first-year coursework but be provided with far more weeks of teaching and study support than the typical undergraduate.

The experiment is working. Most College entrants pass first-year, enter second year and in general perform as well or better than students who have entered by traditional methods on the basis of higher ATAR scores. Presently offered only at the Nirimba precinct in Blacktown, the Commonwealth government has recently awarded the university around \$25 million to expand the College model to Bankstown, Penrith and Lithgow.

Second, **integration**. If educational aspirations are to be raised, and tertiary education made more accessible, the educational opportunities for students need to be integrated.

For UWS that means working with the teaching staff of over 50 high schools to encourage 1800 students from year 9 of the value – and excitement – of further study. The Fast Forward program succeeds in persuading around two-thirds of participating school students to go on to further education beyond year 12. About 40% head to university, predominantly but not exclusively to UWS. The program represents a significant investment in the long-term learning potential of western Sydney.

Of course, the foundations of educational success are set in place long before the teenage years. That is why UWS's next bold step is to take the Fast Forward program into the regional primary schools.

GWS is also fortunate to have two significant and progressive TAFE Colleges. The South Western and Western Institutes together teach 1700 programs and courses to around 167,000 students each year. They operate 16 colleges. We are working together to ensure that the pathways between vocational and higher education are clear and our programs complementary. We are jointly developing a Collaborative Learning Network to give students greater choice as to where, when and how to study.

Already 16% of UWS students enter university on the basis of their vocational qualifications. Credit recognition is given to a huge range of vocationally oriented Certificate IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses. They are taught not just by the TAFE colleges but by private providers such as Alphacrucis College, the Australian Career Business College and Williams Business College (all of which have training facilities in Parramatta).

Third, **distribution**. One option for economic growth in western Sydney is to imagine a ‘city of centres’ with economic activity decentralised from the CBD.

This is the structure not only of the network of public and private providers of vocational education but of UWS. We now operate from campuses in Blacktown, Bankstown, Campbelltown, Hawkesbury, Penrith and Parramatta. In a region in which public transport options are limited, the extensive network of tertiary education institutions offer students the convenience of a local deliverer (although, of course, many students choose to attend campuses in order to undertake particular course offerings).

This scheduled model of education imposes significant additional costs on the university but helps ensure that the university network is strongly associated with the region in which it operates. Although Parramatta is the UWS campus facing greatest growth pressures, and is the location of all university graduations, it is not the hub. All campuses, with their distinctive histories, are equally part of the university: indeed the administrative headquarters is presently located at Penrith.

Fourth, **engagement**. Few universities place as strong an emphasis on community engagement as UWS.

We see the region’s local government authorities, businesses and community organisations as integral to our development: as sources of advice, advocates on our behalf, providers of internships and funders of scholarships. The people who work for them are increasingly UWS alumni.

The Excellence in Research Awards (ERA) rankings last year bore testimony to the areas of world class research that now exist at UWS, from cultural studies to civil engineering, plant biology to creative writing. As the university becomes increasingly successful in winning ARC linkage and discovery grants, so the opportunities increase for public research to be transformed into new products and services. Properly harnessed, the intellectual property of academic insight can be commercialised in ways that enhance employment prospects for the region.

UWS is, and will remain, a university of its people. It is also a place of increasing research excellence. Engagement with business in industrial-educational precincts, with space set aside to incubate new entrepreneurial enterprises, has the potential to transform the sense of community into dollars.

Fifth, **responsiveness**. UWS, through its teaching and research, provides an opportunity for western Sydney to think (and engage) global whilst acting (and benefitting) local.

A university must always have greater ambition than utilitarian purpose. UWS does more than train doctors, nurses, lawyers, accountants, engineers and teachers. It educates.

Blue Sky research and arcane academic study can often seem remote from the needs of western Sydney, but they provide a pathway to learning for students that they can then contribute to regional development in a thousand different ways – by building businesses, providing professional services, working with not-for-profit enterprises, participating in political life or contributing to the cultural milieu of a participative society. Some might even join the ranks of academia.

UWS recognises, however, the responsibility of responding to the particular needs of western Sydney and ensuring that its research in science, medicine and the social sciences contribute to public policy. We have a responsibility to provide an economic and social return on our educational investment in ways that meet the diverse goals of our multifarious stakeholders.

Let me conclude. There exists the opportunity for UWS, the TAFE Colleges and private providers to become the educational heart of a virtuous circle, providing graduates with the skills to transform western Sydney.

Let me give just one concrete example. UWS has almost 5,000 students studying teaching. Of those that graduate each year slightly more than half will work in the region. Without UWS graduates the public schools of western Sydney would be struggling to recruit their teachers.

It is important, as this conference suggests, to re-think Sydney and re-imagine how it looks from Penrith, Campbelltown, Liverpool, Bankstown and Blacktown. We need to recognise that the campus at UWS at Parramatta stands at almost the exact demographic centre of Sydney. We need to make Greater Western Sydney bigger, better, more exciting and more connected.

Most fundamental of all we need to make the region smart. Training and education, skills acquisition and learning, have the potential to revitalise what the cities of western Sydney can offer to the CBD.