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UNIVERSITY



**AUSTRALASIAN COUNCIL OF DEANS OF ART, SOCIAL SCIENCES  
AND HUMANITIES**

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**'THE ROLE OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES IN OUR  
UNIVERSITIES AND IN THE ASIAN-PACIFIC CONTEXT.'**

**14 SEPTEMBER 2017**

**VC'S SPEAKING NOTES**

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Thank you, Tanya.

May I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and elders past and present.

I am delighted to be invited to add my voice to what I believe is an absolutely critical topic.

With global tensions stretched to breaking point on the Korean peninsula. With the conventions of Western political democracies being recast. And with the very legitimacy of many of Australia's political representatives in doubt, the need to engage, question and understand the implications of these issues has never been more urgent, nor more important.

Before I venture to grapple with these wicked problems, you may well ask, what business does a mathematician or, Vice-Chancellor have in addressing such wide-ranging and distinctly humanist trials and tribulations?

Fair point. But as I hope to illustrate, by taking these questions on, I am embracing what I think is a vital consideration in mapping the role of the humanities, arts and social sciences in the Asia-Pacific context.

Finding a way ahead, a viable path towards understanding the challenges our region faces requires that we transgress borders. And, one of the most important border-crossings to undertake is one that tests the limits of traditional

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academic paradigms.

Reflecting on this very challenge, political theorist Bernard Crick observed he “found the mantle of ‘Professor of Politics’ too restrictive” when putting forward what he called, “free speculation and analysis about conflicts of interests and values inherent in the human condition” – or more concisely, “politics”.

Crick was specifically responding to critics who argued his biography of George Orwell was flawed because he was – quote – “a political scientist and thus ill-equipped, incompetent, insensitive, crass and wickedly perverse” to cross what he refers to as “a sanctified line” of intellectual demarcation.

Yet, this is a line that is not merely crossed in contemporary politics. It is used, abused, ridiculed, and re-drawn with abandon by those with little regard for its intellectual grounds.

Staying on politics, think about how the very next day after Trump advisor, Kellyanne Conway uttered her infamous, ‘alternative facts’ defence, Orwell’s, dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* topped Amazon.com sales charts worldwide.

As disturbing as Conway’s transgression was, it is somewhat comforting that a significant proportion of the electorate made the correlation and understood the implications. It took a novel, a work of fiction, and not a peer-reviewed political science dissertation to make the leap.

As academics, we too must be prepared to make that leap. And we must do so in a manner that respects, but is not constrained by nor unduly precious about discipline boundaries.

For those who transgress logic in the interests of political expediency pay no respect whatsoever to the demarcations we may valiantly seek to defend.

We must reflect on just what it is we are striving to protect. The simplest assertion would be we are standing up for academic rigour, depth of expertise, and a lineage of informed enquiry. These are the constituent parts of any discipline. And, in a setting that is regularly described as the post-truth era, they are vitally important and eminently worthy of recognition.

But I want to argue, that opening up these intellectual tenets to the broadest possible range of scrutiny and the highest degree of cross-pollination imaginable is the best way to strengthen them.

You might say I’m pushing for an open-borders policy for the humanities and social sciences. I most certainly am. But importantly, I’m advocating for a two-way flow.

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Let me provide an example. The most pressing issue regarding wide-spread digital transformation is not one confined to the disciplines of science, computing, engineering and mathematics. It is unambiguously a matter that draws on the foundational elements of the humanities.

Far more than we are driven to question how something works, we are compelled to ask what does it mean?

This is the vein of critical enquiry that inhabits and infuses every aspect of digital transformation.

When, for instance, we are told automation will trigger large-scale labour market disruption we are likely to ponder:

- how will it affect me... my family?
- will I lose my job?
- what will it mean for my childrens’ education?
- who will gain the most?
- who will be left behind?

Even if we aren’t asking these questions in academia, they are most certainly front-of-mind in broader society. In many respects, they are evident in rising levels of disaffection and disengagement with established politicalnarratives.

So often, particularly during election campaigns, politicians fall back on meta-slogans to do with ‘economic growth and technological progress’. And all too often they do so at the expense of actually explaining or perhaps even countenancing what growth and progress means on individual, social and cultural levels.

Consequently, the slogans lose meaning. People tune-out. They stop listening. Worse, they stop caring.

That’s a dangerous place for politics to be heading. It is a place where evidence is replaced by agendas and fact is overrun byfear.

This is where the humanities are indispensable. They help us to make sense of otherwise impersonal, abstract and remote concepts. They help us to connect with, and feel a part of change rather than just passive subjects ofit.

And bringing the humanities, the arts and the social sciences into the field-of-vision of technological change, drastically expands the possibilities of what change can be, of what it can enable, and how it can be understood.

Let me explain. The platform for some of the most impactful forms of digital disruption we are seeing may be technological. For instance, Uber, Air B&B, and iTunesU are all App-based constructs, and the accessibility this technology platform has afforded them has seen them trigger massive labour-market, economic and technological dislocation.

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But, they are essentially re-configurations of social, interpersonal and transactional exchanges. They are a re-casting of human dynamics that are inherently humanist in their design, adoption and impact.

Sure, the technology behind them is fundamental to their form and function, but their success is founded on what they enable people to do.

Why is it as a society that we are so quick to characterise and define digital developments only by their technological attributes? Perhaps it is because it is because the technological dimension of something new is ironically its most stable part.

Trying to imagine what technology will do in human hands is infinitely more unpredictable. Again, the Korean situation is testament to that fact.

This is why the humanist core of intellectual study cannot be denied.

Writer, Edward Said decried the notion that we could separate so-called ‘intellectual work’ from ‘human work’. We are, he argued, situated in and of the world. And our work – regardless of its discipline, its pretence or its intent – is about us and about our world.

That is the mantle the humanities, arts and social sciences hold, it is up to all of us to ensure it remains so.

Thank you.