

'State of the University' – Vice-Chancellor's All-staff Town Hall

Wednesday, 7 August 2024

Waterfront Campus and live-streamed to all staff

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Welcome and Acknowledgment of Country

Hello everyone, and welcome.

Thank you so much for joining us in Geelong today, including staff from our campuses across Victoria.

And for the first time ever, we can say our operations around the globe, because we now have our campus in GIFT City in India up and running, and our campus in Bandung, Indonesia is well on the way.

This past Sunday, Warrnambool ran the first of our Open Days – it was a great day, with 25 per cent more students than a year ago. And the weather gods were incredibly kind to us...no rain, no wind and lots of blue sky.

The Waurm Ponds and Waterfront Open Days will be on the 18th of August, and Burwood on the 25th.

I'd encourage as many of you as possible to join us on one of those days. They really do have a special atmosphere and are so important in the life of our students, considering where they're going to take the next steps in their education career.

As I indicated in my recent staff update, I'd like to spend today reflecting on the last five years in my role as Vice-Chancellor.

And in anticipation of our 50th anniversary celebration starting in December, I'd also like to extend the scale of time further in either direction – looking back to our origins, and ahead to 2030 and beyond.

In doing this, I was reflecting on my first speech as Vice-Chancellor in July 2019.

I talked about our Place, Purpose and People, which was the early framing of our new Strategic Plan, *Ideas to Impact*.

When you work at Deakin University, you really do get a strong sense of those three aspects. It was obvious to me on my first day, and it is just as evident now, five years later.

At Deakin, Place, Purpose and People are powerful themes, and closely connected.

But in a very profound way, sense of place reflects the intimate relationship our Indigenous communities have with air, waterways and land.

When we launched our new Indigenous Strategy in February last year, I expressed some personal feelings about the importance of this; feelings that I'd like to echo today.

I was not born in this country and for much of my life did not live here, but I am now hugely proud to call this country home.

In a tiny way, I feel the significance of the connection to country that underpins so much of our First Nations' past and future.

This country touches you and seeps into your being.

The unique colours of the landscape...

...the muted 'ever-grey-green' of Eucalypt forests, and particularly the smell that goes along with it after the rain.

The vivid, red-dirt deserts of the interior. I'll never forget my first visit to Broken Hill, which was just extraordinary.

The Nullarbor and its unbounded extent of both friendliness and unfriendliness.

The awe of seeing a platypus in a river for the first time. And when you look up and see a wedge-tailed eagle soaring above you.

It's hard to escape a sense of wonder.

So if I feel this after just a few years, how must it be for those whose families have walked this land for thousands of generations?

With that, I'd like to pay my respects to the Wadawurrung people of the Kulin Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are gathered in-person today.

I'd also like to extend that welcome to the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which all our University campuses are based: the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and the Peek Whurrong people of the Maar Nation.

I extend this respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Introduction: a year of milestones

This year is one of important milestones for Deakin.

Of course, the biggest one is our University turning 50 in December.

On the 10th of December 1974, Royal Assent was granted to establish the University, and the Deakin University Act was passed in Parliament.

Following the Universities Commission's recommendation, the new campus of The Gordon at Waurnd Ponds became the site of the University, establishing from day one a symbiotic relationship with The Gordon that is maintained forevermore.

Just as Deakin was different in the early years, the world was also a very different place in 1974.

But as with every era, events took place that defined our future; and perhaps give us context to reflect on what the next era might be.

Back then, the internet was only a pipe dream – just a small network set up between research institutions.

In America, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was amended, to prohibit discrimination based on sex, along with race, colour, religion, and national origin. Quite extraordinary, to think you even needed to amend it this way to prohibit such discrimination.

Due to the Watergate Scandal, Richard Nixon became the first American President to resign. (But after the events of recent years, is there anything that can shock us in US politics?)

I'm not sure if anyone here remembers this, but 1974 was the birth of the Rubik's Cube – invented by a Hungarian sculptor and professor of architecture – originally as a tool for a design project. It became an instrument of daily torture for many of us in the 80s.

The Godfather, Part 2 was released. Leonardo DiCaprio and Alanis Morissette were born. (They're both 50 years old. It makes me feel very old.)

And perhaps the most seismic impact...the ABBA song, 'Waterloo' won Eurovision.

In Australia, it was the year that Evonne Goolagong won the Australian women's singles title.

Our road signs switched from Imperial to metric. And the first Australian credit card – Bankcard – was introduced.

It was also a severe year for weather.

1974 was a new record for rainfall in Melbourne. The Brisbane River broke its banks in January, and Cyclone Tracey devastated Darwin in December.

As for Deakin University, we have come a very long way since our modest beginnings.

As well as the upcoming 50th anniversary of Deakin as an institution, we recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education – now Deakin Warrnambool – which was founded in 1970.

Last year, Deakin College turned 25. And this year marks 30 years of our relationship with India.

And quite impressively, we marked the occasion by opening the world's first, foreign-owned, in-country teaching campus in GIFT City.

Far less impressively, but more personal for me, the 1st of July marked five years as Vice-Chancellor.

We are also approaching five years of our Strategic Plan, *Deakin 2030: Ideas to Impact*, which was developed through the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and launched at the end of 2020.

Given all these milestones, I've been doing a lot of thinking about the history of our University over the last five decades, our journey together over the last five years, and what the next five years might – or could – be.

Since 2019, we have achieved and shared many successes. And we have certainly had to overcome some of the bigger aspects of adversity that we've ever had to face in our history.

We know that there will be further challenges ahead.

But for 50 years, Deakin has proudly forged a distinctive identity.

We've done that because of a sense of Purpose, a sense of Place, and our People.

Those achievements have come despite the winds of change sweeping through again and again, including notably:

- The Dawkins Revolution in the 1980s, which completely reshaped higher education.
- Our mergers with Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education and Victoria College – now our Burwood Campus.
- The opening of our Waterfront Campus. I can't really imagine Deakin without this space.
- COVID-19; and now...
- ...through the Accord process, possibly some of the most profound changes to higher education over the last 50 years.

Professor Geoff Wilson, our fourth Vice-Chancellor, in the preface to 'Breaking the Mould – Deakin University, the First Twenty-Five Years', wrote:

'Deakin's twenty-five years include the most difficult periods in which Australian universities have had to operate let alone to develop...'¹

Well, perhaps some of us who have worked in universities through the last five years would have a different perspective.

Despite these challenges, Deakin has continued to build a unique identity.

Deakin has changed, but so has the world around us.

Think of the profound impact of digital communications and the internet...and now generative AI has emerged as the latest game-changer.

In my very first address to staff in 2019, I said, 'We hear much of 21st century change and new technologies – we are a part of that, but we need to ensure that we deliver progress and not just change through new technological solutions.'

genAI is absolutely more proof of that. It is also more proof of the critical importance of the arts and humanities in helping us navigate the ethical and humanistic impacts of emerging technology.

Another profound change since 1974 is that back then, less than 10 per cent of school leavers went to university. That proportion is now approaching 50 per cent.

What makes us Deakin

So, what does make us Deakin? And how have the last five years built on our distinctive identity?

I believe it is quite simply the words captured in the preamble to the 2009 Deakin University Act: 'to be Australia's most progressive university.'²

But only change will deliver progress...and *change is hard*.

There are many quotes and cliches about change. (And we could certainly do a nice academic lecture on the subject.)

The classic by Heraclitus, who probably began it all: 'The only constant is change.'³

Most of these such quotes and philosophising about change are distinctly uncomfortable, and cynical.

But change is never *comfortable*. And it often leads to the opportunity for improvement and growth.

With that sentiment, the great Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote that 'Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.'⁴

But there is a difference between the change we instigate ourselves versus externally driven change.

We know that there are more significant changes coming – across the sector and society.

That may seem more than enough for us to deal with, without bringing additional changes upon ourselves. Why on earth are we sitting here thinking about things that we want to do to ourselves when the world is about to do a whole lot of things to us?

Well, I think if we simply say, 'we're just going to take it on the chin and have the world do to us what it does', and let that shape the future of Deakin, we've done everybody we interact with a real disservice.

¹ R. Hay et. al. *Breaking the Mould. Deakin University, the First Twenty-Five Years*, 2002, p.2

² Preamble to the *Deakin University Act 2009*, p. 1, accessed at: [Deakin University Act 2009 \(legislation.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/Deakin-University-Act-2009)

³ Heraclitus, *an excerpt found among more than 100 fragments of his writings*, circa 500 BC

⁴ G.B. Shaw, *Everybody's political what's what?*, 1944, p.330

Organisations that expect change can find an approach, a culture and an understanding.

Those that do well tend to have a cultural and leadership approach that aims to find that narrow band – an optimal zone – that encourages innovation, challenges assumptions, and is progressive in its culture and its intent.

If you go too far, you end up in chaos and anarchy. And if you don't go far enough, you just end up with stultifying, slow decline.

I acknowledge this is not going to come easily for us.

And if you talk to anyone outside of the university world, there are some words that come to mind; some of which I won't repeat today...but some of them do speak to the context of universities being slow and bureaucratic.

Never do anything in a hurry and always look for reasons *not* to change.

Now, I've spoken about the changes at Deakin in the last fifty years. Any system that goes from 10 to 50 per cent participation doesn't really have those characteristics.

A university that delivered GIFT City Campus in record time from an idea in December 2022 to a building in December 2023, and students starting now, is not in that mould.

But this is not always the way universities are viewed by broader society, or by those who have worked within them.

In 1908, a Cambridge academic published the 'Microcosmographia Academica' – a short pamphlet on university politics.

It has acquired a small cult following, with its very pessimistic view of university politics and depicting universities as places of severe risk aversion.

It begins: 'My heart is full of pity for you, O young academic politician', and posits three principles for fear of change in universities:

- *The Principle of the Wedge* – you should not act now for fear of raising expectations.
- *The Principle of the Dangerous Precedent* – you should not take the right action now for fear you, or your equally timid successors, should not have the courage to do right in some future case; and finally,
- *The Principle of Unripe Time* – you should not do now what you think is right at that moment, because the moment at which they think it right...has not yet arrived.⁵

All of us in some way can relate to this, I'm sure.

As I've said, instigating change and improvements is hard. But in my experience, it doesn't reflect the nature of Deakin University. And I think we should be rightly proud of that.

Coming back to our Deakin University Act, which states: 'Deakin University aims to be a catalyst for positive change for the individuals and the communities it serves.'⁶

Not only do we 'embrace change', but we aspire to be 'catalysts *for* change'.

That use of the word 'catalyst' is very important. Catalysts influence chemical reactions well beyond their natural size. Concentration. Action.

And I believe we think about being a catalyst in a very considered way – not just about *direct* change, but *indirect* change we see over many years. This idea that even a small change in a university can influence greatly beyond its walls is something that is incredibly important.

Education and research is like that. Progress is often incremental, and in almost all cases, hard-won.

⁵ F.M. Cornford, *Microcosmographia Academica*, 1908, pp.9-10 [abridged quote] accessed at: [micro.pdf \(ed.ac.uk\)](#)

⁶ *Deakin 2030: Ideas to Impact*; accessed at [Deakin 2030 - Ideas to Impact | Strategic Plan December 2020](#)

Highlights 2019-2024

Over the last five years, we have achieved remarkable things, despite significant challenges.

Our activities have all been based around our Strategic Plan and the priorities it identifies.

Looking at our 'Plan on a Page' now, would we change it? Probably not. In my estimation, it still captures much of what is most important for Deakin.

Working through those priorities, a few highlights come to mind:

Our People – which form the bedrock of us as a successful university. Our students, staff, friends and alumni, and partnerships.

You've heard me say this before: you can have a great university with terrible buildings. But you can never have a great university without brilliant people. And the people define a university more than the facilities, more than anything else.

We've done a great deal to make sure we support our people, even through the vagaries of COVID.

We were awarded the Australian Workplace Equality Index Gold Medal; and an Athena SWAN Bronze Institution Award.

We appointed Professor Mark Rose as the inaugural Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Strategy and Innovation. And that led to the launch of our Indigenous Advisory Council and our Indigenous Strategy.

When we think about our people, let's not forget that our graduates are the best manifestation of the impact Deakin has beyond our walls. In the last five years we celebrated our 300,000th graduate.

Our Ways of Working – these enable us to achieve our goals, through our digital technology, smart and efficient ways of working, campus infrastructure, and our financial sustainability.

The way we work has changed, some of which was forced on us in a great hurry.

From March the 13th, 2020 – a day that will be forever scarred into my memory – contacting the University community to say we're shutting down for the rest of the week...and when we come back, everything will be online.

Words that none of us could have ever imagined having to think about even a few months before that.

We've had to respond to a very, very hostile IT world, cybersecurity and what AI means for us.

But we've taken to that positively. We became Cybersecurity Educator of the Year.

And we've responded to genAI. We've looked at that technology and said: how can we use it best? We now have guiding principles for its use that we will keep evolving.

We thought about the ways we work, launching our 'Ways of Working' principles.

We have opened a fair number of buildings in my time: the Exercise and Sports Science and Deakin Law buildings at Burwood, the Deakin Imaginarium Nyall at Waurin Ponds, the refurbishment of Costa Hall at Waterfront, and later this year we will open the Hycel Technology Hub in Warrnambool.

And over the same period, we've grown our international footprint.

Deakin's presence is not just local. We never really were. But it has been an auspicious year for Deakin's international presence.

We've launched the Deakin India Hubs and GIFT City.

We're planning to open Deakin Lancaster in Bandung, Indonesia. But there is a lot more happening around that.

Deakin's footprint is genuinely global. We are well on our way.

But without doubt, despite this great success and ambition internationally, Deakin's financial sustainability has been a central concern in recent years.

Whilst we've achieved a huge range of things, it would be remiss of me to not acknowledge the significant financial challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. And it wouldn't be a VC Town Hall without a financial summary!

Overall, we have done what we said we would do in our recovery from COVID. Everything we did was shaped by the impact of the pandemic on what we were operating.

One principle was that we knew we couldn't *spend* our way out of it. And we couldn't *save* our way out of it.

We had to walk that narrow path between spending more than we were earning for a while. But at the same time, not cutting too deep, otherwise we would inhibit our recovery.

And I think we should be really proud that we've been able to do that.

COVID hurt Deakin financially. To what extent we can argue for many years. But we are on track. We are sticking to what we committed to do.

Essentially, there are two things that we're about as a university, and we need to remember that it's the education we deliver for our students, and it's the research and innovation we do that makes a difference beyond the walls of our university.

Now, next year or in thirty years' time, it's making a difference in the world. We have to remember that when we're thinking about our future.

Deakin is one of the very small number of universities in Australia that is above average in its research performance and above average in its education performance.

We're still there. And there are some things that we should not change. That is one of them. If we give that up, we are no longer the Deakin that we admire. As we approach 2030, maintaining this will factor into all our decisions.

In a volatile world, the only two constants for Deakin are the need for education and the need for research.

As you know, I don't give too much credence to international university rankings. But it has also been a very successful period for Deakin on that front.

Including notably a rise to our highest ever position in the QS World University Rankings – into the top 200 for the first time.

That really does matter out there because whatever my cynicism of rankings, the global education community does look at the top 200 in the QS and Times Higher Education rankings as notable.

Research income is also an important measure. It tells us a great deal.

It's remarkable that in five years we have more than doubled that metric for research performance.

But it's not just about the input that is money. It's also about the outputs. You don't get those dollars into your university unless your peers or your funders say you're doing something fundamentally good.

No other university in Australia has grown their research performance research metrics at the rate that Deakin has done over the last decade. This is quite remarkable.

The Leiden is but one measure of research performance. But the great thing about Leiden is that it's pretty uncorruptible. It is based on really clear, publicly available metrics.

But what all of them are telling us is that Deakin is now sitting somewhere between ninth and tenth in Australia.

That – again – for a young university, is a remarkable achievement.

The rankings paint a macro picture of what's happening at Deakin. And all of those rankings are underpinned by many, many elements of research excellence, right the way across our University.

I'm not today going to pull out any of them. But to acknowledge that without a huge number of individual contributions, we would not have been able to do what we have achieved.

Our research is growing in scope and quality, and is leading some remarkable outcomes in our communities.

But let's not forget that the greatest single impact that Deakin delivers is through our graduates and our education.

A Deakin education is a high-quality education.

Our students are telling us that. For 14 years in a row, the most satisfied students in Victoria.

Our performance in measures of teaching quality continues to sit at the very top of large public universities. It's because so many people across the University care.

At the same time, we've adapted, evolved and reflected on our approaches.

At the start of COVID, we rapidly migrated our education experience to be wholly online and recalibrated the way we undertook research and partnerships.

We were able to look at our assessments, introduce a new grading scheme, and made sure that our students weren't affected unfairly by the pandemic.

We launched our DeakinDesign principles and practices for teaching and learning.

We built a Teaching and Learning Academy to enhance teaching capability and collaboration.

We launched our Graduate Learning Outcome program to better integrate Indigenous Knowledges across the curriculum.

But it's not just what happens in the University. When our students *leave* the organisation, they have great employment outcomes.

And we continue to reflect on what we need to do to build new courses to meet the future needs of our communities.

A common thing that prospective students tell us is that sustainability credentials are one of the most important factors when they're choosing a university.

And Deakin has a genuine commitment to sustainability. It matters to us as an organisation. It matters to our stakeholders and it absolutely matters to our students.

In the face of climate change, we take the principle of 'local change that matters beyond the local'.

And importantly, taking real and meaningful action to reduce our own environmental footprint.

We do this in many ways. Not least through our commitment to reducing carbon emissions, which has seen a very significant reduction since 2019.

But as with all things, change impacts everything we do.

Sustainability is one such area where the inevitability of change will influence our decision-making. We're at a point where we'll have to work harder to avoid diminishing our ambitions to reduce our impact on the environment.

And what do all our activities mean? What is the sum? Why do we do what we do?

Well it's simply as stated in our strategic plan-on-a-page: the impact we create beyond the walls of our university. 'Impact driving progress' across social, cultural, economic and academic perspectives.

Nothing is more important than the impact of our education and research beyond our walls.

Balanced excellence remains at the heart of Deakin. And I'm pleased to say that even though the measures this year aren't quite the same as they were in 2019, the evidence still shows that Deakin is sticking to its commitment of delivering genuine balanced excellence.

I am very proud of our staff, students and community for all that we have achieved since 2019.

And as we ramp up preparations for Deakin50, please think about your own memories of the University, and provide an idea or submission.

Looking ahead to Deakin 2030: challenges and opportunities

Now, let's turn our perspective to the future – looking to Deakin 2030 and beyond.

What of the next five years? Or fifteen? Or fifty?

I would like to use this opportunity to share my thoughts about some of the critical issues we are now facing, and how our future is shaping up.

Despite everything, we've got a lot going for us. We're in a great position.

But there are acute issues we need to think about.

While I mentioned some of our incredible new facilities earlier, our 'big build' phase came to an end very quickly during the pandemic.

Given the changes in ways of working and the needs of our staff, students and partners, what kind of balance do we now need between campuses and digital?

And when it comes to 'change' and being 'progressive' and 'brave', we must remember the role of universities – the importance of 'Ideas to Impact' – the fundamental importance of ideas.

The role of universities is to raise big questions...and to contribute to some of the more difficult societal changes that need to happen.

And there are definitely some areas where I believe we need to be a catalyst for change.

Firstly, the role of universities in the contest of ideas.

We need to protect our ability to challenge within a framework – keeping it respectful, but unrelentingly challenging the status quo.

This is what earns the commitment to free speech...an environment where staff and students can raise and be exposed to controversial ideas.

That is what we are about. If we give that up, we are lost...our commitment to academic freedom and freedom of speech.

One of the things that troubles me most at the moment is that technology has pushed everybody in our communities into ever more isolated bubbles of thought.

The algorithms feed you things that you think you would like. And that sense of a contest of ideas where people are coming with different or even diametrically opposed ideas is getting harder and harder to do – and harder for people to find the middle ground.

But again, let's turn to history. This is actually not a new challenge.

At a different but equally troubled time, when debates were being had during the Vietnam War, the first Chancellor of the University of California, Clark Kerr said:

'The purpose of the university is to make students safe for ideas – not ideas safe for students.'⁷

This is a paradigm that hasn't changed, and his words still ring true today.

There is a commitment in the preface to our Strategic Plan: 'Deakin is an environment where ideas are pursued with passion and where they can be challenged freely.'⁸

These are large philosophical challenges, but we are also being challenged by changes in government policy.

The Universities Accord. International students and education. And the domestic higher education landscape – there are potentially some big changes coming.

If you read anything about higher education, the same narrative is taking place in the UK, in the US, and in Canada at the moment.

People recognise the good we do, but they are challenging some of what they see are – and I use the term loosely – 'problematic' characteristics of the modern university.

I'm not saying I agree with them, but that is the way it is being portrayed out there.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is our two pillars of Education and Employability, and Research and Innovation that define our distinctive identity.

That balanced excellence between our two central, interlinked missions.

Every one of you across Deakin enable these missions and bring them to life, ensuring Deakin is able to transform our ideas into impact for our communities.

There are challenges. But I passionately believe in the future of Deakin University.

I greatly look forward to celebrating our 50th anniversary with you in December and plotting our path toward 2030 and beyond.

Thank you.

⁷ Kerr, C. From a speech delivered at Harvard University, later published in *The Uses of the University*, 1963

⁸ *Deakin 2030: Ideas to Impact*; accessed at [Deakin 2030 - Ideas to Impact | Strategic Plan December 2020](#)