

## **INQUIRY INTO FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NSW TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR**

**Organisation:** Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue

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## **Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education**

### **Inquiry into the Future Development of the NSW Tertiary Education Sector**

The Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue is pleased to make the following submission, noting the Terms of Reference, and adopting a regional focus on Greater Western Sydney (GWS).

#### **Introduction: tertiary education as transformational ‘fair go’**

Since our inception the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue has been an enthusiastic advocate of comprehensive, agile, versatile and equitable university and vocational training sectors. Nowhere can the opportunity to continue education beyond basic schooling have more of a life-changing impact on ordinary Australians than in a region like GWS, still too often over-represented in many socioeconomic metrics of disadvantage. Now more than ever, inclusive and accessible pathways into advanced education hold the key to maintaining a truly ‘fair go’ right across Australian society.

In this light, one of the most gratifying evolutions to have witnessed over the last few decades – and since 2015, played a partnership role in – has been the transformational impact on GWS of the tertiary education sector’s explicit and deliberate shift towards improving access and resources for regionally, culturally and socioeconomically ‘non-traditional’ catchments like ours. This has been particularly evident in the westward expansion of established institutions like the University of Sydney, in the form of satellite campuses and research centres, and especially in the rise of new institutions: regional TAFE and other VET hubs and courses, and of course, Western Sydney University (WSU). WSU especially has become an anchoring powerhouse of education innovation, arguably the single most influential force in changing the education aspirations and outcomes for those living in GWS.

In the space of a few decades, tertiary education in GWS has transformed itself, and we submit that there are lessons the whole sector can build on. In emerging almost from scratch in the modern era, in symbiotic parallel with profound changes in economic, regional, intellectual and cultural markers, tertiary education in GWS has developed a uniquely innovative philosophical and material approach, one eschewing the traditional ‘ivory tower’ separatism of the past in favour of social, cultural and economic integration. This is equipping institutions like WSU, other university satellite campuses and research centres, and the blossoming regional VET networks, as true ‘advanced educators of tomorrow’, lending them an organic enmeshment that is increasingly aligning both ambition and capacity with the thrilling opportunities unfolding in its host region.

We commend the following observations to Committee members.

#### **Tertiary education as economic multiplier: ‘in, and of, the material world it which it exists’**

It is of course self-evident that the research, knowledge and skilled workforce ‘outputs’ of its tertiary education sector will have a defining strategic impact on any economy. However, conceived, planned and developed intelligently, the tertiary sector can also play a more direct economic role. New facilities, programs and influxes of students will always generate associated commercial activity, but this can and should be leveraged to greatest effect by maximising the integration of tertiary education growth within local and regional economies. University campuses, TAFE hubs, stand-alone research centres and facilities, student servicing and accommodation clusters and so on, are all powerful economic activators in themselves. The international student marketplace is the starkest example of

tertiary education as direct commercial participant. This approach is clearly not without all the usual marketplace risk but rejecting traditional 'ivory tower economic exceptionalism' doesn't only release economic benefit outwards. Critically, it also inculcates - institutionally, among research and teaching staff, and the student body – the vital notion that tertiary education, however admirably (and necessarily) 'elite in ambition', must also remain 'in, and of, the world in which it exists'.

**WSU vertical campuses:** The first of the WSU vertical CBD campus facilities to open, in Parramatta, set the tone and template for this 'fully embedded model' by embodying it, physically, aesthetically, functionally and didactically. Purposed-design and developed in full interactive partnership with major commercial interests (such as Charter Hall and Lang Walker), and from the start unapologetically hosting commercial and public tenants (such as Price Waterhouse Cooper, Sydney Water) alongside its own, WSU Parramatta has already since served to produce students, staff and researchers for whom traditionally self-conscious and counter-productive arguments - such as 'the public good *versus* the private good', and whether or not 'commercialisation' helps or hinders the progress of elite knowledge - are now quaint anachronisms. Partnerships forged in tertiary education within the WSU model have helped move the debate beyond such contrived demarcations, and its material world actuality has been an explicitly intentional part of this shift. The similarly-conceived and pedigreed Engineering Innovation Hub now underway in the Parramatta CBD, the vertical campuses in Liverpool and as-planned for Bankstown, and the Innovation Quarter evolving as part of the Westmead Education and Research Precinct, are all further examples of how WSU is using design and operational integration to sidestep moot introspection over tertiary education's 'proper role and place'. Dismantling an always-artificial segregation between 'academic' and 'commercial' elites, and simply seeking out the best of both worlds and facilitating a joint approach, is one key to maintaining world-class excellence in Australian tertiary education and research.

**Specialist Research & Teaching Precincts:** Another powerful manifestation of the explicit embrace of tertiary education as a direct economic driver is the Westmead campus of the University of Sydney. This has become a globally recognised powerhouse of medical research, training and teaching, home to over 2000 students and some of world's leading experts in their specialist field, but also catalyst and engine room of economic transformation in countless more immediate ways. Aside from the (obvious) health sector activity, major participants in the transport, housing, corporate, technology and hospitality sectors are all irresistibly drawn to such 'coalescing hubs' of excellence. A major hospital will always generate local economic activity, but a major hospital that is also an explicit host of cutting-edge research, scale teaching and training will further draw innovators, creative disruptors and ambitious wealth creators from other sectors, too. The University of Sydney's Westmead 'Precinct model' is – like the WSU vertical embedded campus – a template that can and should be (indeed, is being) replicated by other tertiary institutions. Similar 'precincts of integrated tertiary education and economic excellence', might for example potentially focus around IT, advanced manufacturing, communications, agriculture, sustainability and other industries.

### **Tertiary Education as regional and cultural pillar: Research centres, TAFE hubs, location-bespoke institutions, decentralisation**

Complementing this integration of tertiary education excellence and wider, related sector activity in GWS have been other evolutionary peculiarities, often driven by necessity. Regional dispersion, creative use of available real estate, dexterity in funding partnerships, and a 'blank sheet' approach to curricula planning and disposition are all elements of the region's tertiary education landscape that might serve to help re-invigorate and re-invent the sector more broadly. In comparison to the more hierarchical, centralised model of universities past, WSU in particular – as an institution starting from scratch barely three decades ago - has of necessity embraced asset decentralisation, diversity of



student catchment (regionally and culturally), course partnerships with commercial and international stakeholders, non-traditional fields of study, and bespoke research programs with a focus on applied outcomes, often 'in-situ'. Other universities are expanding similar regional campuses, satellite centres, specific 'on-site' research projects and student centres, while TAFE and other VET providers have steadily dispersed their footprint, too. It is in GWS increasingly a case of the 'education going to where the students are', rather than the more traditional reverse. The result is a vibrancy, diversity, dispersion and responsiveness of opportunities throughout GWS that is arguably unmatched in any other region of Australia. To note only the WSU case, it now boasts seven campuses, offering programs from over a dozen Schools, as well as 20 research institutions, centres and groups, stretching from the northern Hawkesbury to the southern highlands, from the CBD into the Blue Mountains, and of course, deep into cyberspace.

By fully engaging within its catchment area like this, tertiary education becomes a regional and cultural 'pillar of its own community', allowing its resources and ambitions to better reflect the nature and demands - and leverage the strengths - of a much richer and deeper 'talent catchment' than the older, centralised model. This has opened up the very idea of what 'tertiary education' can and should be in modern Australia: for example, by transforming the clinical, silo approach to health care, via CALD methodologies and teachings evolved at WSU's Translational Health Research Institute and the Chinese Medicine Centre; or through 'impact zone' environmental research, such as in urban heat island mitigation, water sensitive urban design and urban greening; or in the expanding or in sustainable agriculture and animal management research and teaching in many rural/outer GWS locations. Nothing focuses 'cutting edge' research and the sharing of elite knowledge better than it being conducted where - and by, in and among those to whom - its outcomes will matter most.

The point is not to make a case for any particular research, course or curricula choices, at this or that institution of tomorrow. Rather, it's to highlight what dispersed institutions like WSU, the University of Sydney (with facilities like Camden's Uni Vets and Equine Centre), and regional VET hubs (like Blacktown's Chifley College & TAFE complex, and Campbelltown TAFE), have learned-by-doing, over three decades of organic evolution. Namely, the importance of higher education being allowed to 'breathe' in response to its natural habitat and native participants, rather than imposing a fixed, hierarchical vision of 'higher education' from a position of lofty and removed authority. The culturally varying characteristics of WSU, and the extraordinarily diverse world its education assets inhabit, has made this a natural process, but we urge the Inquiry to recognise its virtue when contemplating the future direction of the sector more broadly. By its nature, higher education and advanced research is largely the business of 'finding out what we don't yet know, and what we don't even know we don't know, and thus need to find out'. We urge this discussion not to make the mistake of assuming that the tertiary education of tomorrow must conform to the forms, benchmarks and educational content of yesterday.

In particular, noting that the university sector has often served as a de facto battlefield in a wider so-called 'Culture War' over just such questions - territorial disputes about 'fixed v. changing' social, ideological and political values - we respectfully urge all Inquiry members and contributors to resist any such 'bad faith' misuse of this Inquiry platform.

### **Tertiary Education as co-funded, commercial sector partner**

In keeping with general economic, cultural and regional integration, full and direct engagement with the commercial sector has always been a necessary component of the tertiary business model in GWS. Particularly given the likely permanent impact of Coronavirus on international student revenue, this funding trend of the last few decades, one which has necessarily been embraced with particular flair and vigour by WSU, will likely become even more widely prevalent than it is. Significant parts of the sector do, still,



remain hesitant about what some regard as an antithetical relationship – that between academic learning and commercial activity. However, the GWS experience generally and the WSU experience specifically counters any assertion that applying the profit motive as a driving force somehow delegitimises or compromises the outcome of elite research and education. Much of WSU's strength and capacity is, in fact, the explicit *result* of partnerships with 'for profit' entities. This is also seen in the University of Sydney's Westmead experience, where many research--commercial partnerships flourish, as they do throughout GWS in similar vehicles such as the Ingham Institute of Applied Medical Research (UNSW, South West Sydney Local Health District/NSW Health, multiple corporate partners, sponsors, benefactors). Far from compromising elite education and research the commercial imperative has typically concentrated and enhanced it, by matching research to problem-solving, helping the public sector secure and monetise IP far better than the old 'naive academic' model ever did, streamlining the bespoke provision of workforces, and so on. The experience in GWS is that this isn't only limited to institutions, research centres and schools where the commercial opportunities are obvious - such in innovative engineering, agricultural and medical research partnerships - but to all areas of elite education.

### **Tertiary Education and public funding and support**

Tertiary education, then, should not be intimidated by commercial sector participation. Nor, indeed, should the reverse be the case. Neither 'commercial' nor 'academic' are pejoratives, especially when deployed together to jointly identify, define and solve any problem: the academic elites furnishing the blue sky thinking and the technical and scholarly expertise, the commercial elites distilling, disciplining and directing it. As noted, there remains some resistance in the older segments of the sector to the idea of tertiary education and commerce as an authentic equal partnership, rather than a self-consciously supplicant-donor one, and we urge the Inquiry to continue advancing the former case, as the virtuous and fertile one is surely is.

Having submitted this, we do take the opportunity to join the loud calls for a significant rethink and re-commitment from governments to public funding and other support to university and VET education, particularly the Federal sector as a vital source of leadership and resources. The coronavirus crisis and the havoc it has wreaked on the international student funding calculus has merely accelerated and telescoped the onset of operational pressures that were, in truth, already on the radar. As important as private sector partnerships and 'for profit/user-pays' components as above will be in 'paying the bills', public funding and support for tertiary education must also be fiercely defended and preserved, not just as an important practical contribution but also a manifest collective expression of our national recognition of its importance.

In the short term we urge a national response to tertiary education's currently devastated financial landscape, as well as intelligent policy accommodations in crucial areas like international student travel, visa and work status flexibility, and accommodation and living support eligibility parameters. High fee-paying international students have been a key part of the tertiary education fiscal mix for decades. We submit that extending all possible support to preserving the viability of that model through this crisis moment is not simply a moral imperative at the human scale and in the short term, but a prudent and long-term macroeconomic investment too, very much in the sector's, and our collective national, self-interest.

### **Tertiary Education as Planning and Design Innovator**

Another area where the tertiary education sector has an opportunity to be a value-adding force beyond the direct outcomes of its primary research and education role, is in the way it can embody and lead material, functional and operational innovation. New tertiary facilities and resources tend to have the enormous planning and execution advantage of continual organic access to cutting-edge ideas and concepts, whether it is in building design and construction (communications systems, movement and interconnectivity, IT, sustainability), or didactic methodologies (teaching disposition and timetabling, resource allocation, course and research structure, and so on). Again, the Inquiry should contemplate the operational success of the CBD vertical campuses of WSU Parramatta and Liverpool. Both are exceptional examples of how buildings



can themselves not only optimise the capacity of the research and teaching resources they house, but actually become a multiplier of it, via IT interactivity, teaching space flexibility and adaptability, and an easy interactivity between theoretical study and research, and its application.

Another area where there is great opportunity for innovation and functional embodiment in design and construction is the new Western Sydney Airport and Aerotropolis precinct, which will form the beating heart of a new 'smart city', of which tertiary education assets will become both shapers and reflections. The University of Sydney has a strong geographical footprint; the NUW Alliance has announced plans for its 'multiversity', and space has been allocated for a new 'SuperTAFE' model for VET provision. Architecture, structure, design, built environment, sustainability, communications and connectivity are all areas ripe for innovation, and evolving new concepts in tertiary education delivery in tandem with new ways of physically embodying it, will enable the sector – if stakeholders are alert to the thrilling 'green fields, blue sky' nature of this moment – to progressively harmonise purpose and functionality, material and human resources, ambition and expression.

### **Other Terms of Reference issues**

**Plea on funding issue discussions:** The Dialogue again acknowledges the impact of the current health crisis and subsequent international travel restrictions, and the need for free discussion on a potential recalibration of a funding model perhaps grown too reliant on international students. While detailed contribution to this is outside the Dialogue's expertise, as strong champions of the multicultural richness and harmony of GWS we take the opportunity to respectfully urge all Committee members – indeed, all those involved in this debate – to resist any tendency for discussion on international students to 'mutate' into subtle exercises in 'dog-whistling' of any kind. The fiercely-aspirational armies of bright-eyed, optimistic young students from places like China, India, Africa, South East Asia and beyond, have in recent decades made an immensely enriching contribution to GWS, NSW and Australia, in ways that extend well beyond the impact of their wallets. We think it would be a grievous failing if this Inquiry played host to even the faintest hints of xenophobia.

**Freedom of Research, Expression and Speech issues:** In a similar vein we acknowledge the legitimate issues around freedom of research, expression, speech and campus quality of life raised in the Terms of Reference. There are important discussions that of course must be had, across a whole range of sensitive topics. These may include the appropriate future place and partnership role of culturally diverse research strands and centres of study (such as noted earlier, in non-traditional medicine and non-western philosophy), and their potential implications for economic, research and intellectual freedom – perhaps even national security implications. Once again, these matters are beyond the scope of the Dialogue's expertise and particularly interest. We acknowledge that the Inquiry must naturally be free to canvas them all, but again simply note the potential for 'bad faith' contributors to misuse this platform regarding such topics, and urge all to show due care and sensitivity when addressing them.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, the Dialogue thanks the Committee for this opportunity to contribute to this discussion. We wish all participants well and look forward to following the Inquiry as it progresses.

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