

**OPENING REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER  
UNDERWOOD AC, GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA AT THE 2012  
HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT  
SOCIETY OF AUSTRALASIA CONFERENCE, HOBART,  
TUESDAY 3<sup>RD</sup> JULY 2012**

As the Governor of Tasmania it is my privilege and pleasure to welcome you all to Tasmania and to Hobart in particular for the 2012 Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia. Some of you have come from overseas – although of course if you are not Tasmanian you must have come from overseas – but I hope that those who have come a long way over the seas and those of you who have not been to Tasmania before will be able to find a little time to have a look around our island while you are here because it is particularly beautiful in the winter months. I know, you may need to wear thermals sometimes, but it is still beautiful with its clear blue skies, clean air, fresh water and beautiful wilderness areas.

When I am asked to open a conference I like to say something that is relevant to the matters being discussed at the conference. I carefully studied your incredibly busy programme and toyed briefly with the idea of giving you the benefit of my views on the sessions “Harmonising health professional accreditation and higher education quality assurance by identifying common graduate learning outcomes” and “Bridging the divide: generating dynamic university wide library-faculty connections to enable the explicit development of students' research skills” but confess that the only sessions that I

could really understand were morning and afternoon tea and reception at Government House. As my background is the law I thought that perhaps my 3-hour dissertation on “The Rule of Law” or “The Importance of the Independence of the Judiciary” might go down well, but my wife counselled me against this course. Actually I think – “inflicting upon you” were the words that she used.

So I approach my assigned task of opening this conference acutely aware that I am standing in front of a distinguished group of people who share a common knowledge of, and interest in, a very specialised field of expertise; a field of expertise in which research is critically important because according to the 2008 OECD review of tertiary education:<sup>1</sup>

“Tertiary education contributes to social and economic development through four major missions:

- The formation of human capital (primarily through teaching);
- The building of knowledge bases (primarily through research and knowledge development);
- The dissemination and use of knowledge (primarily through interactions with knowledge users); and

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<sup>1</sup> Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society, Vol. 1 at page 13. 2008 ISBN 978-92-64-04652-8.

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- The maintenance of knowledge (inter-generational storage and transmission of knowledge)."

However, I did see from your programme that there is to be a workshop session on Wednesday afternoon entitled "Connecting with our Communities," and that caught my eye. The subtext in the programme says about this session:

"Community engagement is increasingly gaining importance as a strategic priority of tertiary institutions. In many, it sits alongside teaching and research as a pillar of strategic planning. Just as the sector has welcomed debate on the teaching-research nexus, do we now need to open the discussion about the teaching - community engagement nexus to encourage adoption by teaching academics and buy-in from our communities?"

When I saw that I thought yes, it is important for tertiary institutions to connect with the community. When I was the Chair of the Board of a private school here in Hobart I quickly learnt how important public perceptions were. Unfortunately the word "perception" often carries with it an ancillary meaning that perception does not reflect reality. So that if one asks, what is your perception of an institution, the answer

carries the implication that the reality is something different. But of course, there is no reason why the perception of an event or of an institution cannot coincide with the reality of that event or institution. The School Board of which I was Chair, as are most school boards, and dare I say, most higher education institutions, is continually engaged in the business of attracting students and funds. It was then that I became well aware that the perception of an institution was more important than the reality, even when the two coincided. If an institution is seen as a poor performer then it will be treated as a poor performer even if in fact it is a good performer. A perception of poor performance will see the School or other institution funded and supported as a poor performing institution, even if the reality is quite the reverse of that perception.

Perceptions not only drive public support; many public institutions depend upon good perceptions for their power. When I sat on the Supreme Court Bench of this State I sometimes used to think about this when imposing sentence. Imagine this scenario. I impose a sentence for a serious crime by fixing a prison sentence of 10 years with a 6-year non-parole period and at the end of my remarks the prisoner stands up and says, "It's too much Your Honour." I would no

doubt look offended and likely say to the prison guards, “Take him down to serve his sentence.” What would I do if the guards stood up and quite politely said, “No we agree with the Prisoner Your Honour - it’s too much”? I would now likely be very pompous and say to the police officers on security duty, “Arrest those two prisoner officers for contempt of Court and take the prisoner in custody.” But their response might be, “No, we agree with them Your Honour, the sentence is too much.” What could I do? What power could I exercise? There I would be all dressed up in my red ermine trimmed robe and wig on my head, but completely devoid of power because of a perception that I had imposed a manifestly excessive sentence and the authority of the court had lost the support of the public as expressed through all those officers. My power to send people to prison depended on the public’s support of the work of the Court.

So it’s not enough to simply have a good tertiary institution. It is necessary to work at being perceived as a good tertiary institution. My experience has been that the only way to ensure that the perception coincides with the reality is to make connections between the institution and the community in which it wishes to thrive. How that is best done depends on the nature of the institution. In the case of my

Court we started to publish on line all the judge's comments on passing sentences on the day the sentence was imposed and we held public workshops on how the court exercised its sentencing discretion. In effect we invited the public to look inside the Court and see how it worked.

You would all know better than me that tertiary education institutions can connect with its community very well by developing programmes that will see the institution reaching into the community and the community reaching into the institution. The Conservatorium of Music here connects very well with the community by working with amateur choirs, bands, small groups and so on both at the Conservatorium and in the community. Researchers do it very well through programmes of applied research. Utas geographically connects with the community by not only setting up campuses in different centres across the state but also by developing programmes that are specific to the needs of each centre. Utas understands the importance of connecting with the community. This statement appears in a Green Paper prepared as part of the 2012 - 2016 strategic planning process:

*Our position as the sole university in Tasmania brings with it exceptional potential for engagement with the economic, social,*

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*cultural and intellectual life of the island. We must configure ourselves to facilitate meaningful partnerships with government, industry and communities in Tasmania and across the world recognising that from relationships flow opportunity."*

But this needs the enthusiasm and participation of the teachers and researchers to make it work. I have to say the University of Tasmania under Vice-Chancellor Rathjen and before him under Vice-Chancellor Le Grew has been very successful in building connections with the community so that many Tasmanians now speak about "our University" with pride even if they have never been there. I think that that sort of perception is essential to the success of every tertiary institution these days.

So if I was attending tomorrow afternoon's workshop - you are all probably relieved that I am not - I would say that community engagement is indeed an important strategic priority for tertiary institutions. In my respectful opinion I think it should sit alongside teaching and research as a pillar of strategic planning. If it hasn't already begun, the discussion about the teaching/community engagement nexus to encourage adoption by teaching academics and buy-in from our communities must get underway.

However, I'm not here this morning to lecture you but to welcome you, to wish you a successful, stimulating and rewarding few days and to open this conference which I now have much pleasure in doing.