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We live in challenging times. Ours is an era in which evidence, intellectual inquiry and expertise are under sustained attack. The phrases ‘post truth’ and ‘alternative facts’ have slipped into common use. Agendas have displaced analysis in much of our public debate. And we are all the poorer for it.

In Australia and around the world, we’ve seen the emergence of a creeping cynicism – even outright hostility – towards evidence and expertise. We saw this sentiment in the post-Brexit declaration by British Conservative MP Michael Gove that “the people of this country have had enough of experts”.

And yet – as we strive to cure cancer; save lives from preventable disease; navigate disruption; lift living standards; overcome prejudice, and prevent catastrophic climate change – expertise has never been more important.

The turn that public debate has taken is a challenge to universities. As institutions for the public good, we exist to push the frontiers of knowledge. We enhance human understanding through methodical, collaborative, sustained and robust inquiry. That doesn’t discount the wisdom of the layperson. And it doesn’t mean universities have all the answers. Far from it. But we are unequivocally the best places to posit the questions.

Universities are places structurally, intellectually, ethically and intrinsically premised on confronting society’s most complex and confounding problems.

We are at the vanguard of specialist knowledge. And we are relentless in its pursuit. We have to be. Because – like the challenges we as institutions immerse ourselves in – the pace of change is unrelenting. In universities, questioning is continuous and answers are always provisional.

The intensive specialisation, in-depth inquiry and measured analysis universities undertake is not carried out in service of some ulterior motive or finite agenda. In the conduct of research the finish-line is very rarely, if ever reached. There’s always more to learn, more to discover.

The core objectives universities pursue can never be about any other agenda than the truth. There is no other, nor greater reward. So let’s not disparage expertise, or the critically important role of evidence and intellectual inquiry. Universities perform an essential role in society. We must stand up for evidence. Stand up for facts. Stand up for the truth. Because

if we don't, who will?

Pivotal role

Universities and their experts are also vital for addressing the disruption which is drastically refashioning the economy, reshaping the way we work and reimagining the way we engage with each other in our local communities and globally. Universities help us make the very best of disruption, ensuring we are able to 'ride the wave'.

And they are the institutions best equipped to buffer us against the fallout. This is particularly important in regions that have relied for decades on large-scale blue-collar industries. For places like these, universities can be a lifeline.

Internationally, the evidence is in. Former financier Antoine van Agtmael and journalist Fred Bakker look at this very scenario in their recent book, *The Smartest Places on Earth*. They uncover a transformative pattern in more than 45 formerly struggling regional United States and European economies; places they describe as "rust belts" turned "brain belts".

Akron, Ohio is one of the most remarkable examples they cite. This midwestern city had four tyre companies disappear practically overnight. The then president of the University of Akron, Luis Proenza, reached out to those affected, rallying them to collaborate and encouraging them to transform.

"What stayed in Akron", Van Agtmael writes, "was the world-class polymer research that has given us things like contact lenses that change colour if you have diabetes, tyres that can drive under all kinds of road conditions and hundreds more inventions." Akron, he continues, "now [has] 1,000 little polymer companies that have more people working for them than the four old tyre companies."

This kind of transformation, at Akron and beyond, Van Agtmael remarks, is "university centric". "Each of these rust belts becoming brain belts," he concludes, "always have universities."

In places like those he describes, and many others around the world, universities and their graduates are leading vital processes of renewal within economies experiencing upheaval.

The engine of start-ups

In Australia over the past decade, the start-up economy has become part of a national strategy for economic diversification and growth. Yet what has not been widely understood is the extent to which universities and their graduates are responsible for that growth.

Startup Smarts: Universities and the startup economy, a new report by Universities Australia and the survey group Startup Muster, confirms that universities and their graduates are the driving force in Australia's start-up economy. It tells us that four in five start-up founders in this country are university graduates. Many start-ups, too, have been nurtured into existence by a university incubator, accelerator, mentoring scheme or entrepreneurship course.

There are more than 100 of these programmes dispersed widely across the country, with many on regional campuses. They provide support, physical space and direct access to the latest research. They help to grow great Australian ideas into great Australian businesses.

This report confirms just how important the constant evolution, renewal and refining of course offerings at universities is. We need to ensure that our programmes equip our students and graduates for an uncertain future. By the time today's kindergarten students finish high school and are considering university study, start-ups will have created over half a million new jobs across the country.

And this new sector of the economy – a sector indivisible from our universities – raised

AU\$568 million (US\$431 million) in 2016; 73% more than the previous year. By the very nature of the reach of our universities, the benefits are not confined to our cities. We play a vital role to help regional Australians and farmers stake their claim in the start-up economy too.

Technology enables our regional entrepreneurs to stay in our regions; building and running businesses, investing locally without the need for long commutes or city relocations.

This, too, is very important; making sure nobody is left behind. That includes Australia's Indigenous people. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, in his recent *Closing the Gap* report, spoke of the way education can help to bridge the shocking disparities in health, education, employment and life expectancy between Indigenous people and other Australians.

He said: "The higher the level of education, the smaller the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment." And he added: "For tertiary-educated Indigenous people there is no gap."

This statistic affirms something that most of us know instinctively. Education transforms lives. Australian universities now have 74% more Indigenous undergraduate students than in 2008. And yet while Indigenous people make up 2.7% of Australia's working age population, they account for only 1.6% of university students.

As a matter of both equity and excellence, Australia needs to draw on the talents of all its people. We need the skills and talents the First Australians bring to our universities.

Public engagement

Comprehending and overcoming the complex problems the world confronts, in my view, requires that we defend the role of expertise and intellectual inquiry. That doesn't mean universities are the last word on knowledge. To a large extent, it means rethinking the way knowledge is conveyed beyond university gates.

If universities don't turn their minds to this issue, others will. And their motivations may not always be altruistic. Contemplating this problem, Czech author Milan Kundera wrote of the purge of hundreds of university academics by the Soviet-installed regime after the 1968 Prague Spring.

This act, he posed, was part of a state sponsored drive of "forgetting"; one by which Party-sanctioned truths replaced all others. The totalitarian world was, in Kundera's view, a world based on answers, on absolutes. The Party was put forward as the solution to both real and imagined problems.

Confronting this absurdity, he observed, "the stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything." In contrast, Kundera concluded, "the wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything."

Current circumstances globally have me thoroughly convinced that this approach has never been more necessary. The voice universities contribute to public debate must resonate with that questioning imperative. The approach I'm talking about must inhabit the core business of universities.

Take research, for instance. When the facts of a particular field of inquiry are under attack, the natural reaction among researchers might be to tighten up their retort and hone the theoretical armoury. It is right to be rigorous and methodical in research. But in the broader communication of our research – in the public dialogue beyond 'the lab' – I think universities have to guard against retreating to overly technical language that, perhaps inadvertently, sidelines all but a limited group of specialists.

I don't suggest that research can't benefit or even be improved via a researcher's consciousness of a particular, often very specific audience. Yet researchers who allow this consciousness to dominate the development of their work risk undermining their ability to

tread new ground and challenge existing frontiers of knowledge.

Only by crossing borders can we come to something new. How many researchers' discoveries have arisen from a subversion of discipline, practice or establishment? Virtually all, I would suggest.

As universities, as a society, we must be mindful of how important it is to ask questions, to follow our curiosity, to challenge boundaries and to never rest with the answers. Universities are places shaped through their capacity to question and ideally overcome the most bedevilling and complex problems. But, at their heart, they must be places where everyone who has the desire to follow their curiosity is inspired and encouraged to do so.

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