

University Alliance Future Leaders study tour 2024





About the study tour

The University Alliance launched the Future Leaders Programme in response to global pandemic challenges. This initiative fosters collaboration and knowledge exchange among future leadership talent within the Alliance and the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN), aiming to advance the higher education sector.

As leading representatives of professional and technical universities worldwide, the Alliance and ATN are natural global partners. They explore mutual collaborations in innovation, knowledge exchange, industry partnerships, teaching, and applied research. The ambitious Future Leaders Programme offers Vice-Chancellors and emerging leaders a unique opportunity for face-to-face dialogue with international counterparts. Participants share experiences, exchange best practices, and collaborate on innovative solutions to challenges encountered by leading technology universities.

TechnologyOne, a prominent supplier of smart software solutions for UK and Australian universities, generously supported this initiative.

AUSTRALIAN
TECHNOLOGY
NETWORK
OF UNIVERSITIES

ATN
25
YEARS



Foreword from University Alliance CEO Vanessa Wilson



There are few times in life when the stars perfectly align and a concept that started life as an excited video call idea actually happens. A concept that plays out as ideated and delivers - and keeps delivering - so much so that you have stop and pinch yourself that it really did happen.

The University Alliance Leaders 2024 Programme has been just that. The second of its kind, its pilot predecessor taking place in California in 2022: a pioneering and arguably 'courageous' experiment given the pandemic but one that delivered all the same but equally learnt itself to even more possibility on reflection, which we invested into the development of this latest programme.

What we are essentially talking about is a senior leadership development programme. A programme that offers aspiring leadership talent within the University Alliance (UA) membership to come together as a peer group; engage with leaders across the membership with provocations and insights from industry and a range of sectors to enable participants to develop and reflect upon their own personal leadership portfolio and brand as they scale the dizzy heights of the leadership ladder.

An essential - some would argue extremely privileged - element of the programme is the first phase of

the programme, which involves a week's immersion for the participants overseas with their senior sponsor (usually the Vice-Chancellor at their institution). Overseas because we quickly concluded we would never get this group properly away from the institution let alone their senior sponsor and the early peer group bonding and learnings would never happen.

Overseas for this year's programme meant Australia and a truly intensive - some would argue punishing - week making our way across Australia west to east, deep diving into our Australian cousin universities of the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN). Five universities, four cities over five days exploring the strengths of what our cousins are doing as well as hearing about the challenges they are facing and how they are navigating these. Sharing, learning and in time, it is hoped, collaborating. The visit timed to align with the publication of Australia's review of Higher Education, the Australian Universities Accord, with numerous recommendations providing a useful discussion point for our interactions with university leaders as well as the Skills Minister, Brendan O'Connor.

We set out with a number of themes we wanted to investigate and explore over in Australia: funding, financial sustainability, innovation, technology, industry partnership,

research, diversity and AI to name just a few. We came away with a greater appreciation of the sheer scale of a nation operating across an incredible geographical landscape and cultural diversity.

Australia has been the destination that has kept on giving. We would like to thank the ATN members for welcoming us so warmly onto their campuses. We would also like to thank TechnologyOne who made the immersion visit possible through their sponsorship and the expertise of Peter Nikolettatos, their Global Industry Director and Adjunct Professor, who helped develop the programme, accompanied us throughout and ensured we never blinked and missed anything that Australia had to offer us.

University Australia CEO Luke Sheehy

As the CEO of Universities Australia, I am delighted to extend a warm welcome to the University Alliance cohort. Your visit marks a significant moment for us, as we engage in a vital dialogue about the common themes impacting higher education.

The recent release of the Universities Accord Final Report has underscored the importance of long-term reform plans to meet future skills needs. This aligns closely with the challenges faced by UK institutions, where the focus on developing a robust and adaptable workforce is equally paramount.

Our discussions have highlighted several key areas of mutual interest, including the need for increased collaboration between academia and industry, the importance of research and innovation in driving economic growth, and the role of universities in fostering social cohesion and cultural understanding. Moreover,

the Accord's 47 recommendations offer a blueprint for transformation that resonates with the UK's own ambitions for higher education. As we navigate the complexities of global education landscapes, it is clear that our shared experiences and insights can lead to more effective strategies and outcomes.

I am confident this visit will strengthen the bonds between our institutions and pave the way for future partnerships. Together, we can address the pressing issues of our time and contribute to the prosperity and wellbeing of our societies.

Thank you for the opportunity to engage in such a meaningful exchange. I look forward to the continued collaboration between Universities Australia and the University Alliance, as we work towards a brighter future for higher education.



Australian Technology Network of Universities Executive Director Dr Ant Bagshaw



As the newly appointed Executive Director of the Australian Technology Network of Universities, I want to acknowledge my colleagues, within the ATN directorate and member universities, who played a key role in scheduling visits for our University Alliance representative colleagues.

Your visit represents a pivotal opportunity for us to explore the common themes that are shaping the landscape for universities in both Australia and the UK. In recent times, we have witnessed a surge in the demand for technical skills, driven by rapid technological advancements and the evolving needs of the global economy. This has placed technical universities at the forefront of education and innovation, tasked

with preparing the next generation of skilled professionals.

Collective discussions with our ATN members revealed a shared commitment to enhancing the student experience, fostering industry partnerships and prioritising research that addresses real-world challenges. We recognise the importance of adaptability and resilience in our curricula for ensuring that our graduates are both technically proficient and equipped with the transferable skills necessary to thrive in a dynamic work environment.

Furthermore, the exchange of knowledge and best practices between our institutions is invaluable. By learning from each other's

successes and challenges, we can collectively enhance the quality and impact of technical education.

I trust the insights gained from this visit will lead to stronger collaborations and innovative solutions that benefit both our countries. I look forward to the continued dialogue and the positive outcomes it will bring to our respective universities in Australia and the UK.

Thank you for the enriching engagement and the shared vision for excellence.



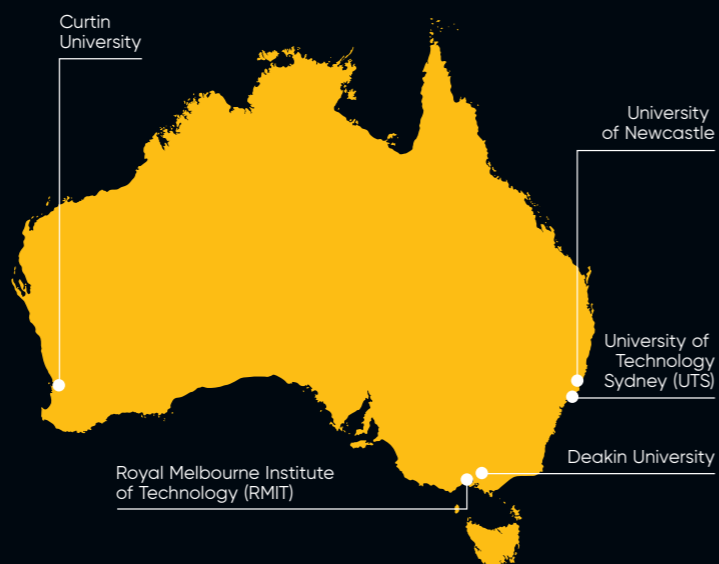


Study cohort

- **Professor Mohammad Ali, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean**, Faculty of Business and Law, Anglia Ruskin University
- **Professor Roderick Watkins**, Vice-Chancellor, Anglia Ruskin University
- **Professor Ann-Marie Cannaby**, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Health, Coventry University
- **Professor John Latham**, Vice Chancellor, Coventry University
- **Sarah Setchell**, Chief People Officer, University of Derby
- **Professor Kathryn Mitchell**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Derby
- **Professor Mairi Watson**, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire
- **Professor Quintin McKellar**, Vice Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire
- **Andrew Corti**, Executive Director of Finance, Middlesex University
- **Dr Duncan Cockburn**, Vice-Principal for Strategy and Planning, Robert Gordon University
- **Professor Donna Whitehead**, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of South Wales
- **Dr Ben Calvert**, Vice-Chancellor, University of South Wales
- **Professor Craig Gaskell**, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Enterprise and Knowledge Exchange, Teesside University
- **Dr Isabel Spence**, Lead Coordinator, University Alliance
- **Vanessa Wilson**, CEO, University Alliance
- **Peter Nikolettatos**, Global Industry Director Education and Adjunct Professor, TechnologyOne



Host universities




"We saw some impressive enterprise and knowledge transfer activity, with some of the ATN Universities working at scale, with very productive industry partnerships, and commercialisation activities."

Professor Craig Gaskell

Professor Craig Gaskell

Pro Vice-Chancellor,
Enterprise and Knowledge
Exchange, Teesside University



"University Alliance Leaders have a high level of skills, emotional intelligence and humility, it has been a privilege to be part of this cohort."

Dr Ben Calvert

Dr Ben Calvert,
Vice Chancellor,
University of South Wales

Tour highlights

Day 1

A university situated in the heart of Perth in Western Australia, named after Australia's 14th Prime Minister, John Curtin. True to its origins, Curtin University is a technology powerhouse offering industry-focused higher education courses to its students as the state's largest and most multicultural university.

We are warmly welcomed by Vice-Chancellor and Chair of the Australian Technology Network of Universities, Professor Harlene Hayne CNZM, and a Forum Flagpoles ceremony and acknowledgement of Country that is powerful and emotional in equal measure.

Acknowledgement of Country we soon find is a consistent theme throughout the study tour.

A strategy for belonging

We meet the top team at Curtin University: Dr Marco Schultheis, Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer; Professor Xiaotian Zhang, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Global; Fiona Notley, Chief Operating Officer; and Jessie Parrish, Project Manager.

We are taken through Curtin's 2030 strategy including plans around embracing sustainability as a key pillar of their strategy and ensuring a sense of true "belonging" for all their students focusing on the key touchpoint moments of a student's journey throughout university.

Supercomputing centre

Finally, we are treated to a tour of campus and a visit to the Pawsey Supercomputing Centre, which is led by Mark Grey, Head of Strategic Partnerships, Ugo Varetto, Chief Technical Officer and Karina Nunez, Marketing and Events Manager.

The centre is one of only two Lower case Tier performance computing facilities in Australia. Its primary function is to accelerate scientific research for the benefit of the nation. Data is stored close to supercomputers, allowing seamless analysis. The adjacent, remote rendering capability allows real-time visualisation of simulations and data allowing advances in research across a spread of domains including astronomy, life sciences, medicine, energy, resources and artificial intelligence. As part of the tour, we are shown the latest supercomputer named "Setonix", which is the scientific name for Western Australia's iconic quokka, a marsupial some of the programme participants saw in the flesh when they visited Rottnest Island at the weekend.

Before we leave, we are gifted with our own quokkas (of the soft toy variety) to take home with us.



**Curtin
University**

Tour highlights



Melbourne



RMIT

Day 2

RMIT University is a global university of technology and design and one of Australia's original tertiary institutions. Based in Melbourne, it has a global reputation for excellence in practical education, applied and innovative research, and engagement with the needs of industry. RMIT is a leader in engineering, accounting and finance, computer science and information systems, communication and media studies, psychology, education, law and economics.

RMIT has three campuses and two sites in Australia, two campuses in Vietnam and a research and industry collaboration centre in Spain. In addition, programmes are offered through partners in Singapore, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India and China, with research and industry partnerships across the globe. It has 10,00 staff globally and 90,000 students.

The group were greeted by Professor Alec Cameron, Vice-Chancellor and President of RMIT and received presentations from Saskia Loer Hansen, Deputy Vice Chancellor, International and Engagement and Professor Sherman Young, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Education. Over lunch, the leaders met the rest of RMIT's senior leadership team and there was a lively discussion led by Alec Cameron drawing on his experiences of being a Vice Chancellor in both Australia and the UK.

International

Saskia focused in on RMIT's international activity and fulfilling the university's aspiration to be a leading university of impact in the Asia-Pacific region. RMIT does a lot of work engaging with ASEAN Nations – aiming to connect South East Asia with Melbourne. The University Alliance Leaders were interested to discuss student and staff mobility and how it has been impacted by the pandemic. Philosophically, it is very important to RMIT but practically, post pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, it is very hard.

Innovation in education

Sherman outlined RMIT's approach to embracing artificial intelligence (AI) within their teaching delivery and curriculum – using it in active, applied, authentic learning. The leaders were impressed by how RMIT has developed its own version of ChatGPT to combat privacy issues associated with Open AI and the training, education and community of practice on AI for both students and staff.

Tour

The leaders were given a tour of RMIT's city campus by their estate lead who treated to the cohort to the latest in teaching and learning environments including the converted lecture hall spaces which are now open plan learning spaces each individually redesigned to suit learners' needs and ethics, including a Wimbledon-inspired green space with terraced seating; a work spaced designed almost with that "just woke up, bed to lecture" style with floor seating and comfort : literally a home away from home! What were once windowless traditional lecture halls have been transformed into light and open spaces buzzing with students.



Day 3

Day 3 and we're off to the Burwood Campus of Deakin University to The Battery Research & Innovation Hub where we are treated to a tour of the facilities and latest research developments by Professor Maria Forsyth. The BatTRI.Hub is a unique, world-class, purpose-built research and innovation centre for battery design and development, encompassing research, pilot-scale manufacturing and the commercialisation of energy storage technologies.

Battery power

Specialising in advanced battery design, fabrication and testing, the facility includes a pilot production line to manufacture advanced batteries and battery components, complementing pouch cell prototyping, a cell and pack testing lab and advanced cell diagnostics, materials characterisation and failure analysis. We are given a behind the scenes tour on all the hub has to offer including research into advance existing technologies such as lithium-ion but also research focussing on sustainable alternatives such as sodium batteries.

Next stop is a tour of Deakin's student accommodation, which demonstrates the lengths the university goes to ensure students are supported on campus with state-of-the-art facilities and 24/7 residential support services.

It's on this site that we are introduced to the School of Engineering and Professors Michael Pereira and Bernard Rolfe and their plans to open up and expand the engineering school in Burwood to encompass Advanced Manufacturing and to hear about the Geelong Future Economy Precinct which is delivering local impact through job and wealth creation.

Applied Artificial Intelligence

Our final stop on the Deakin University tour is a visit to the Applied Artificial Intelligence Institute with talks by Deakin's Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mathew Clarke and a tour of the facilities and latest industry partnership projects by Professor Kon Mouzakis including cutting-edge applied research into supporting dementia patients and preventing life-changing damage from road traffic accidents.

The sheer volume of industry investment that Deakin University commands through its applied research is impressive and certainly provides food for thought for many of the participants.

Before returning to the hotel from Burwood, we take a short side trip to "Ramsay Street," the fictional cul-de-sac from the Australian soap opera Neighbours, which holds nostalgic memories for many in the group.

Melbourne



Deakin University

Tour highlights



Newcastle



The University of Newcastle

Day 4

Established in 1965, the University of Newcastle prides itself on delivering superior education and world-class research. As an institution, the University of Newcastle is committed to making transforming knowledge into innovation that can make a difference in our communities, economies and our planet.

The University of Newcastle has campuses in Newcastle, Central Coast, Sydney and Singapore. It also has regional offices in Orange, Tamworth and Taree. There are 37,946 students including 7,399 international students currently enrolled at the University.

Following a scenic tour along the east coast from the hotel, where the group can see the magnificence of Australia's beaches, we are welcomed to the stunning, leafy University of Newcastle Callaghan campus. We are joined by the University's senior leadership team including the Hon Patricia Forsythe, Chancellor and Professor Alex Zelinsky, Vice Chancellor and President for a breakfast meeting.

Industry partnerships

The group are then given a tour of the Newcastle Institute for Energy and Resources led by Professor Alan Bradfoot, Executive Director of NIER and, while avoiding the many mosquitos, marvel at the excellent research being carried out. The group hear how industry partnerships are playing a major role in how research is carried out and funded at the University of Newcastle – in a truly collaborative engagement model.

This theme continues in a subsequent round table where Professor Zee Upton, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research and Innovation, and Danielle Neale, Director, Knowledge Exchange and Enterprise outlined their innovation and industry partnerships – delving deeper into the extent of this work. A collaboration grant scheme for Newcastle academics requiring industry match funding has helped to encourage a culture of collaboration alongside initiatives such as the requirement for external/ industry engagement when attending conferences.

Skills development and doctoral training

Professor Juanita Todd, Pro Vice-Chancellor Research and Professor Steven Warburton, Pro Vice-Chancellor Education Innovation then led a session on skills development outlining the University of Newcastle's innovative work in this area. Dr Jessica Allen, Coordinator of Doctoral Training Centre in Energy had a discussion with the group on doctoral training with University Alliance CEO Vanessa Wilson sharing UA's experience of running the Doctoral Training Alliance and the potential for working together in this area.

Anthony Molina, Chief Digital Officer then speaks on the University of Newcastle's technology development and implementation, and Professor Jennifer Milam, Pro Vice-Chancellor Academic Excellence and Joel Palmer, Director for Strategy, Planning and Performance discuss growth strategies and productivity enhancement. This is followed by a spirited discussion about the impact of the proposed strategies within the Australian higher education system.

Day 5

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has a bold vision to be a world-leading university of technology. They are known for their industry focus, practice-based teaching and learning, and real-world research. With state-of-the-art campuses and facilities, UTS prides itself on preparing students to become global thinkers, leaders and innovators.

The campus is located mainly in the southern gateway to Sydney's Central Business District and has specialist, off-campus facilities in three locations across Sydney – Moore Park, Botany and Prince of Wales Hospital, Randwick. UTS has a total enrolment of 44,000 students.

UTS Tech Lab

The group start their visit with a tour of UTS Tech Lab led by Professor Eryk Dutkiewicz including the fascinating, Charlie and the Chocolate Factoryesque "Antenna Chamber" also known as the Electromagnetics Informatics Lab (EIL). This world-class facility measures the performance of antennas – a key component in sensing and communications systems.

Impact of environment

Upon returning to UTS's main campus, the group is welcomed by Professor Vicki Chen, Provost, and take part in a round table discussion on the overarching theme of financial sustainability in the context of UTS's external operating environment. The Australian Universities Accord, cost of inflation, international student numbers and per student revenue are all big external issues that impact on the operations of UTS. Glen Babington, Chief Operating Officer, then leads a discussion on UTS's internal operating environment including challenges and pressures on the university's business model.

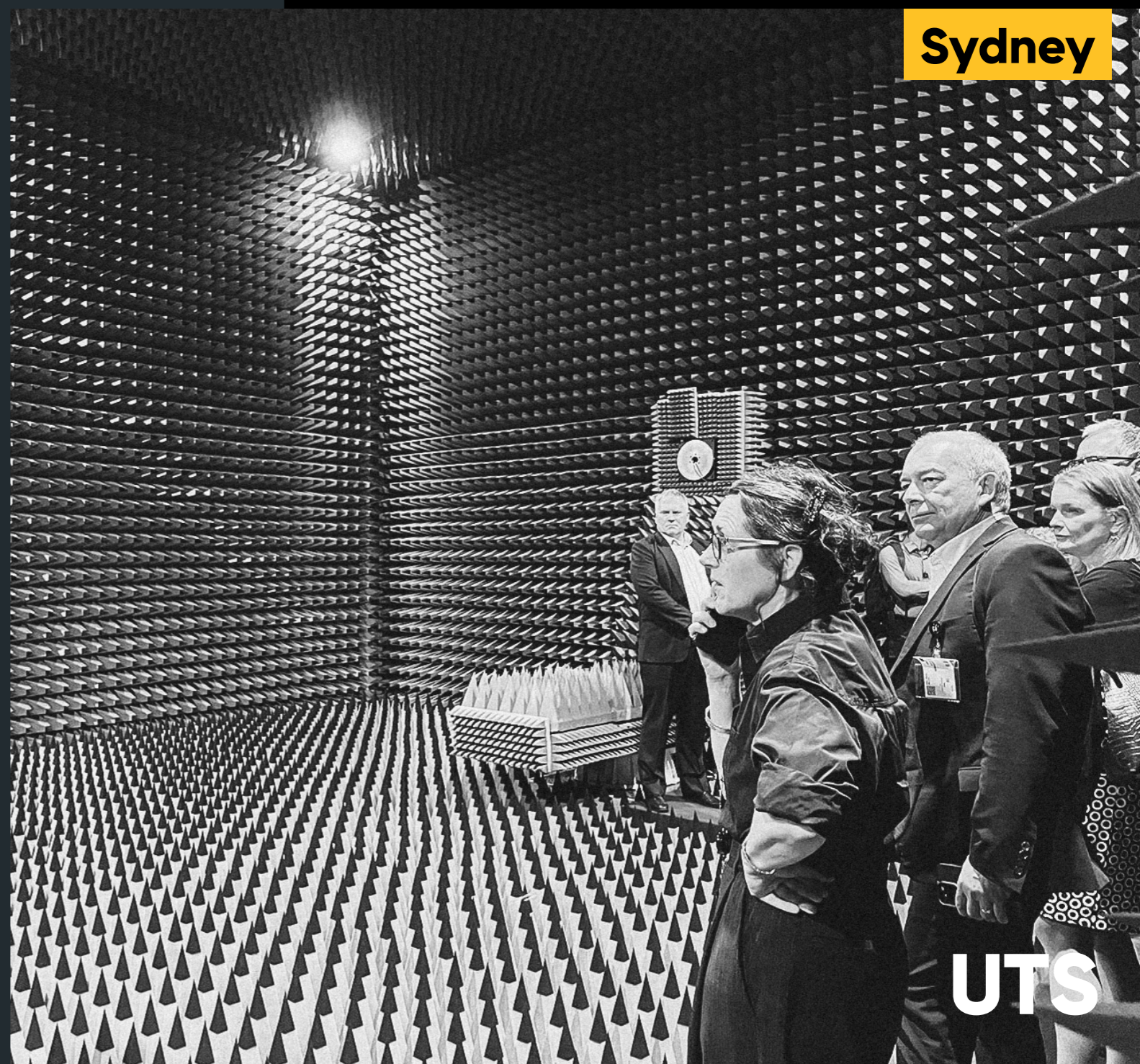
Research progressive

Professor Kate McGrath, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research provides a lively insight into UTS's approach to research and how the institution has gone from no research 35 years ago to top 100 (QS ranking) and 38th (THE) for research quality. She describes their approach to becoming a future-focused research-intensive university and what that looks at in terms of quality, outcomes and impact, sustainable business model and collaborations.

Indigenous education and research

To conclude the visit, Professor Robynne Quiggin takes the group full circle back to the start of the trip and Curtin's 'Welcome to Country' outlining UTS's approach to Indigenous education and research. This theme is highlighted throughout the study tour and the University Alliance group are keen to understand how the Australian Universities Accord impacts Indigenous education and research.

Sydney





Industry voices

Bridging skills and training

The group engaged with The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP, Australia's Minister for Skills and Training during their tour, providing a platform for meaningful dialogue on shared challenges and opportunities between Australian and UK higher education sectors.

Minister O'Connor underscored the ambitions of the Australian Universities Accord in addressing current and future economic, productivity, and skills challenges. He emphasised the Accord's role in fostering collaboration and synergy within the higher education sector, drawing parallels with potential benefits for the UK.

Representatives from the University Alliance responded by reflecting on similar challenges faced in the UK. They provided insights into the Accord's strategic direction and highlighted key areas of focus where synergies with the UK higher education sector could be explored. These included ensuring long-term financial sustainability, enhancing skills development to drive productivity and growth – particularly in light of projects like AUKUS – and the critical role of regulation in safeguarding sector reputation and student interests.

Discussions further explored themes such as widening access and participation, emphasising the importance of placing students at the centre of educational strategies. Ensuring student wellbeing and supporting initiatives like the National Skills Passport were identified as crucial components for future-focused qualifications

frameworks. Additionally, aligning vocational education and training (VET) with modular, stackable skills in higher education was highlighted as essential for meeting evolving workforce demands.

Changes in compliance reporting mechanisms were also discussed, recognising the need for streamlined and effective reporting processes to support sector-wide accountability and transparency.

The meeting underscored the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing global economic shifts, enhancing educational outcomes, and ensuring the sustainability and relevance of higher education institutions in both countries.

The insights shared by Minister O'Connor and the University Alliance representatives set a foundation for potential future collaborations, leveraging each country's strengths to navigate challenges and capitalise on opportunities in the evolving landscape of higher education and skills development.

By aligning strategic priorities and fostering cross-border partnerships, both Australia and the UK can continue to drive innovation, address societal needs, and prepare future generations for success in a rapidly changing global economy.



Professor John Dewar

Professor John Dewar AO

Emeritus Professor, and former Vice Chancellor and President of La Trobe University

Challenges and opportunities in higher education

1. Visas

Our government, like your government in the UK, has decided that the international student pipeline is an easy target if you're interested in reducing net migration into the country. They're doing it in slightly different ways. But to me, it seems to suggest that the social licence that governments have accorded universities to recruit international students may have reached its limit. I've been talking to the Vice Chancellors over the last couple of days and their view is that it is a permanent "new normal".

That matters a lot to Australian universities, perhaps more than UK ones. Because if you look at the history of the revenue and cost lines of universities in Australia since the mid 90s, when our current regime of funding and regulation was introduced, revenue has just about managed to keep ahead of cost all the way through. What

that means is that Australian universities have managed their cost problem just by going out and recruiting more international students, or by charging their existing students more.

In a sense, they've been able to pass on inefficiencies, perhaps, to students. I think that we'll no longer be able to do this in Australia. In fact, we've been doing some work on university financials for the last five years and in just about every state, the cost line has crossed over the revenue line. And that's the first time that has happened since the mid 90s. This is quite a decisive moment for the financial sustainability of Australia's universities. Now, that's not universally true, some are doing very well at the moment because of the government visa policy, which tends to favour the more prestigious institutions, but a lot of universities are staring at very challenging times ahead.

2. Domestic demand

This comes on the top of very weak domestic student demand. Pre-COVID the fluctuations in international and domestic demand tended to go in opposite directions: when international demand goes down domestic demand picks up and vice versa. The universities here are now experiencing a double whammy of both international and domestic demand being down.

This is a systemic problem. Students in Australia are studying part time in greater numbers than before. Students decide for themselves whether they're going to switch from a full time or part time load and they are doing that in significant numbers, which has major implications for universities.

Australia also has a healthy labour market, and given the rising cost of living, there is an incentive and an opportunity for students to reduce their university study in order to go into the labour market. It's a double whammy. I don't think we've ever seen this before and it's lead to us crossing the revenue line for the first time in a very long time.

3. The shift in the university's cost base

At the same time, revenue is not the only problem, costs are also a problem. When we look at the financial trends in the sector, we're seeing a significant increase in cost, driven by staffing, mostly. Looking at university financial statements, it's quite hard to clearly work out why, but there are a number of hypotheses:

- The increase in part time study, plus the overhang effects of COVID has increased the need of students for support. Post COVID, students demand for various forms of support went off the scale. It's as if they were no longer able to self-manage, and relied even more heavily on the university to help. Maybe universities are hoping to respond by putting on more support staff;
- The online and hybrid modes of learning are not cheaper to deliver than face to face, they are in fact more expensive;
- Universities are agreeing enterprise bargains with some very significant pay increases coming down the pipeline, somewhere between 12 and 17 percent, leading to increased staffing costs;
- The underpayment of casual staff in Australia, with prestigious universities quite seriously pinged by the regulator, having to repay significant sums of money.

There are lots of potential contributors to this steady and quite dramatic increase in the cost to service individual students.

4. Our Universities Accord

So there is a revenue problem, and there's a cost problem and I wish I could say that there was a knight on a shiny white charger coming over the horizon. The Universities Accord saw a group of experts commissioned to address a series of terms of reference about the future of the sector.

The good news is that the panel's final report is a great document. There's a lot of really good ideas in it. The mainspring of the whole report is the recommendation that the numbers in the higher education system in this country double between now and 2050, a massive expansion in higher education. There are a lot of other propositions in the report around:

- How disadvantaged students will need to be brought into the system;
- The need for more diversity of providers. It's been interesting to talk to some of you about the idea of non-university subsidiaries providing services back to the university;
- Closer integration of higher education and skills, which I think would be a good thing;
- Increasing more of the indirect cost of research done by a university – theoretically a good thing provided there's more money to do it;
- New qualifications being promoted more than they have been in the past like degree apprenticeships, micro credentials short cycle qualifications.

To preside over this expanding system would be an Australian Tertiary Education Commission. This would mark a huge shift in the way in which higher education provision is planned and funded in this country in ways we can't quite be sure of yet. But the key question is whether that becomes just another grim faced bureaucracy, or actually an enabler of some really exciting potential evolutions and revolutions in the sector.

The question for the sector is: what will be the government's appetite to fund this very ambitious series of reforms? We know there will be eight elections in between, so we are talking multiple government who won't be of the of the same political persuasion. Will there be bipartisan appetite to fund such reform? The sector faces significant policy and strategic uncertainty, pending the decisions by successive governments of how much money they are willing to introduce to the sector.

I think the universities haven't yet taken seriously the job of taking costs out of an organisation will need to do so very soon, because for many people in many institutions, their sustainability is going to be at stake. There are lots of ways you can do that and I do think technology and artificial intelligence offer a significant scope for taking costs out. At La Trobe, we made our biggest over investment in technology on the two occasions where we had to reduce costs.



By Peter Nikolettatos,
TechnologyOne Global Industry
Director and Adjunct Professor

UK universities enjoy world-leading status, but the sector is not without its challenges. As UK higher education institutions look for solutions to overcome their challenges, the recently published Australian University Accord (Final Report) serves as a compelling example of what can be achieved when the government, the higher and tertiary education sector and industry leaders come together with a shared purpose to do just that.

In 2022, and in recognition of similar challenges facing Australia's higher education sector, the newly elected Labor government established the Universities Accord to outline the path to lasting and transformative reform in the higher education system. Their final report, which was released in February, contains a hefty 47 recommendations to promote the growth of skills through greater equity in participation, access and opportunity and enhance excellence in learning, teaching and student experience. Highlighting the importance of higher education to the workforce of the future, the Accord aims to lift the tertiary attainment rate of all working age people from 60% to at least 80% by 2050.

Achieving these ambitious goals will help address skills shortages across industries, ensure student wellbeing, reinvest in research, and ultimately, ensure the financial health and continuing competitiveness of the higher education sector; goals which any incoming government in the UK should strive for.

What can the UK learn from Australia's University Accord?

International students also draw debate down under

As UK universities currently face financial sustainability challenges, they are increasingly reliant on international students to make ends meet. Under an anticipated Labour government, university fees are unlikely to increase for home students, leaving international students key to securing sustainable revenue but fluctuations in enrolments risk the stability and viability of institutions.

While the Australian migration context is vastly different from the UK, international education is a fixture of the economy. In 2022,

Australian higher education providers enrolled almost 450,000 international fee-paying students (more than a quarter of total enrolments), with around 120,000 of these studying Australian higher education courses from outside Australia.

Maintaining this steady stream of full fee-paying students has been marred, however, by failures in quality and integrity in some parts of the market. Some agents encourage students to take advantage of higher education visas being more likely to be approved, only to switch to cheaper vocational training courses or private colleges without ever attending their initial student placement. To overcome these challenges, the

Accord urges the federal government and industry to reduce the 'excessive' pressure on universities to secure international student revenue by paying at least the full economic cost for the university research they commission and university consulting they purchase. This aims not only to enable enhanced research but also to free up funding so that universities can invest in other priorities like learning, teaching and infrastructure, supporting growth and improving education quality.

One criticism of the Accord is that it does not address financial sustainability directly, which will of course be key to making the 80% attainment rate a realistic goal.

Improving student well-being by enriching learning experiences with technology

Given the prominence of student wellbeing in public discourse, it's no surprise that an entire chapter of the Accord was dedicated to delivering a holistic and supportive learning experience to students.

And this goes beyond the classroom. For example, we know part time work is a reality for many students and policy reforms like the jobs broker suggested in the Accord are laudable, but would take time to establish. In the meantime, smarter scheduling and timetabling can be used to ensure students have certainty around their teaching schedule and that the schedule is calibrated to ensure part time work around study can be maintained.

The Accord also paints a great picture of what students should

expect: strong technical and advanced generic skills, a safe learning environment, a student voice in the system, high-quality teaching, innovative delivery modes (both on campus and online), better experiences from student placements, and responsive curricula and pedagogy with deep connections to industry.

To effectively evaluate the success of a holistic learning experience, it's essential to have quality data that encompasses the diverse components contributing to this outcome. Data silos are just as pervasive downunder as over here, and this is where the inefficiency of storing data across disparate systems becomes apparent, hindering rather than enhancing university operations by impeding insights. The remedy lies in adopting an integrated solution, streamlining data management and facilitating more effective decision-making.

It is worth noting that the Accord is seeking around \$10 billion Australian dollars between now and 2050 – a period where we anticipate eight federal elections and at least six state and territorial elections. No doubt a framework for prioritising these initiatives would be a valuable next step.

Not only is higher education one of the UK's key exports, but the success of it will also be transformative for the nation's future. So, as the new government contemplates how to arrest the challenges facing the sector, it might draw inspiration from the principles outlined in the University Accord. By initiating a comparable review or incorporating essential principles and strategies set out in the Accord, the UK can transform its higher education sector for the better.

Addressing workforce shortages and administrative burden

In recent decades, Australia's higher education workforce has grown. But student numbers have outstripped growth in staff. Between 2012 and 2021, the ratio of students to academic staff (including casual staff) grew from 20.4 to 23.2. And yet this reduced workforce reports that their time is increasingly being spent on non-academic activities.

This will sound like a familiar refrain to UK vice chancellors and their teams. There is no doubt that digital transformation is key to maximising the expertise of academic staff, by reducing their administrative burden. Great technology not only helps universities do more with less but is also a key strategy to retain staff, ensuring they are not dealing with menial tasks and instead focusing on meaningful work, be it responding to individual student needs, refining curricular, or improving research qualities.

The Accord echoes this, recommending joint funding by the higher education sector and the government for digital and built infrastructure, essential components of which include enterprise resource planning and student management systems, crucial for enabling university digital transformation. This innovation and digital transformation have enormous potential to enhance the quality and impact of higher education, research, and engagement, as well as to improve access and equity for students from diverse backgrounds and locations.



Same but different

John Latham CBE is Vice-Chancellor and CEO of the Coventry University Group and was part of the University Alliance study tour. John is a double graduate of Coventry University and has a background in information technology and telecommunications. He previously worked for several private sector organisations including JHP Group, Jaguar Cars and BT. In 2015, John was awarded an Honorary Lifetime Fellowship of the British Computer Society for his services to the IT industry.

For most of us, the large impact of this week has been gaining an understanding of the similarity and the differences. If you look at the universities here, in some ways they're very similar to each other, they're very large in terms of their scale. In the UK, of course, we have quite a stratification of the sector, a lot of very small institutions, a lot of very large institutions, 140 public universities, and many more providers as the private sector comes in to deliver higher education.

Australia has some constraints that we don't have in the UK in terms of their level of autonomy. You also have an index linked rises in the tuition fee, that's a dream that we would love to have!

What you also don't have (and I would advise not to go for this) is Brexit. At Coventry University, we used to have 3,900 European students, we now have 300. That's \$30 million that went out of our budget basically overnight.

We are due an election this year, but I don't think it's going to make any difference which administration we have in, there won't be more money available to us. So we've got to plough our own destiny. Looking at

a high-level degree apprenticeships, and the interactions between FE and HE and schools – a number of us now are multi academic trust – we are seeing a much more integrated education system driven by the need for collaboration.

In the University Alliance and from what we've seen with the ATN, we both are a group of institutions that understand each other.

Wherever you go in the world, higher education is being challenged: being forced to diversify, or facing the introduction of the private sector as we have in the UK. The response for a large number of us for many years has been to go international, which meant bringing international students into our home campuses. A number of Australian and UK universities have campuses overseas that all do very well, but we've been bringing more and more international students in and the visa issue is a real challenge, we've reached a tipping point.

Our fixed fee in the UK means we lose money on home students that come and do an undergraduate degree with us, which means we need to add others to help subsidise our teaching activity. For many years, we've subsidised



our research from our teaching activity. But there is fundamentally a problem when an organisation's core business loses them money.

The problem is also getting the government to understand what that means. Either they want a higher education ecosystem that works or they don't, and although there are a few wealthy institutions, the vast majority of the sector is basically looking from year to year, some might have some reserves that might carry them for two or three years, but fundamentally their model is being forced to change – their size, their offering, their structures.

For example, a number of us in the UK now have sister companies or subsidiaries, which is basically looking at where we can gain efficiencies. And the use of technology, the use of digital environments, the move to blended learning (and actually going online can be very expensive) can help. It's about being agile, being entrepreneurial, being enterprising, being first in market and changing.

Unless we have a couple of billion in endowments like Cambridge University, the rest of us has no choice but to change. In fact, I would describe some of our institutions as street fighters – they have to move quickly, they have to adapt quickly, they have to encourage others to work with them. It's all about partnership and collaboration between like-minded institutions. Technology is one of those things that we're going to have to invest in, it's something that we're going to have to see as a competitive advantage.

Students today want to be entrepreneurial; they want to be employed and market ready. And in many ways, they also want to be global. We need to work with governments because universities these days are economic development partners that deliver education and research.

The opportunities for linkages and collaboration between the University Alliance and the Australian Technology Network is quite strong. Coventry University already has very strong relationships with RMIT and Deakin University, I think that could be a lot more. We're sharing our experience and it is enabling us to deliver jointly.

Some people think universities compete with each other – I don't have any competitors, I only have people who help me grow the market. And if I can maintain market share and grow the market with all my competitors, we'll all do very well. Higher education is a growing market and therefore, the ability and the opportunity to collaborate at great scale is there.



Leo Hanna is the Executive Vice President UK for TechnologyOne, a global Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) company that provides the technology systems on which universities run.

The transformation imperative

A big part of the student experience is determined by a student's financial situation. We recently sponsored a really important, thought-provoking project delivered by The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University. CRSP has a methodology for determining the minimum income standard, and consulted with groups of students to produce an estimate for living costs. Unsurprisingly, the findings show that government maintenance support falls short and students are struggling through what the report calls 'The Cost of Learning Crisis', with the majority undertaking paid work during term time. There are some interesting conclusions and recommendations and the work serves to provoke the conversation about what government and all of us can do to improve the student experience during a cost of learning crisis.

The 'student experience' is a phrase that gets used a lot. And interestingly it encourages us, just by the use of the singular to imagine exactly that, one student progressing through higher education. For that one student, the experience is comprised of many discrete but connected components, the quality of the teaching, the friends made (or not!), the houses or halls of residence lived in, the part-time jobs, caring and working commitments the mix of virtual and in-person engagement



with the university, the timetable to follow and the logistical challenges of being at the right place at the right time. It's complex. It is so complex that there are many indexes, many different student personas, each with a different set of universities in the ranking, showing how satisfied students are, and how enjoyable university life is. Then of course we have the NSS data to review. And of course, it's not one student, it's tens of thousands of unique students, each with their individual and specific requirements, challenges, strengths, weaknesses, and life contexts. So the job of delivering an excellent student experience at scale becomes, to a significant extent, one of data visualisation and manipulation.

Imagine for a second all of the data that your institution must hold or chooses to hold about every student. And every prospective student. And every alum. And then about all of the employees, academics or otherwise. And then all the buildings. All the assets. All the contracts, suppliers, and ecosystem entities. It's daunting. And of course, the data is specific to the department that most needs it, departmentalised to make it manageable. And the technology systems used to house the data were mostly implemented to serve that department's needs. There are many departmental datasets, managed by the IT departments, living within discrete systems on servers owned and managed by the university. Those systems are required to integrate just to execute simple business processes that keep the university running.

The timetabling system needs to integrate to the student records system which needs to integrate to the financial management systems, which in turn needs to integrate to the HR system and then to the payroll system or provider.

Now it's natural for things to have evolved in this manner, back then smart people with good intentions made the best decisions they could about how to manage departmental

processes and the associated data volumes and complexity. But fast forward a few years to 2024, these systems are the quick-drying cement that stops the university from moving forward at pace. They integrate with other systems only to enable essential processes. And those integrations are expensive and every time a system is upgraded the integrations need to be tested and possibly reworked. But it is all necessary because the data is necessary!

Not only is it necessary, but it is one of the most powerful assets you have in delivering an exemplary student experience:

What if you could optimise timetabling to take into account all students' home addresses, financial situations, health conditions, responsibilities to others, and part-time paid work schedule? So to try to address the affordability for students what if an institution could make timetable decisions that can reduce the times students have to be on campus, reduce traveling costs, or able to concentrate a timetable so that it reduces the days a student has to be on campus and thereby reduce accommodation costs.

What if you could accurately predict students' grades based on engagement data, regardless of department. Could that help to improve academic outcomes? Or improve student wellbeing by being able to be proactive and identify when a student needs that additional help as opposed to a student having to reach out to obtain the support they need. Take this even further, what if your data tells you that you need to ensure that there are a certain amount of wellbeing appointments needed, and resulting in reduced waiting times for students to see an advisor?

What if you could identify students who were disengaging early enough to do something about it. Could that reduce dropouts, and improve academic outcomes?

What if you could streamline administrative processes for students? Imagine a scenario where all administrative tasks, from enrolment to graduation, are seamlessly integrated into a single digital platform. Students could easily manage their academic records, financial aid, course registrations and more, reducing administrative burdens and allowing them to focus on their studies.

What if students engaged with the institution by accessing and updating their own journey (and the data associated with it through a digital experience that felt 'consumer grade'). Would that create a stronger connection between the institution and the student – and what could that stronger connection lead to?

If the data challenge is addressed, then all of these things and many more are possible. What's more, the time available to focus on academic excellence and supporting the student experience increases.

But of course most of you will be sitting on a technical infrastructure that looks a lot like the departmental system silos I described earlier so the question becomes: how do I get from A to B and unlock all of the goodness for students and the university. One example is the University of Buckingham who have chosen to retire those departmental systems of are now implementing Financials, HR and Payroll and Student Management from TechnologyOne. They came out to market looking for a finance system but when they saw the potential to unlock the power of their data and make the employee and the student experience better they broadened the scope of the transformation they are making.

Technology is only part of the solution, but it is a powerful enabler: The challenge is to unlock the power of the data you already hold to make the university more efficient, with the student experience at the centre of the decisions you make.

Reflections and learnings

Objectives

Going into the programme, the University Alliance Leaders and Vice Chancellors wanted to leverage insight from Australian Universities to enhance their own institutions performance. They were also keen to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange and to understand the impact of the University Accord on the Australian higher education system. Many also had personal development goals to focus on as part of the programme.

Format of programme and group dynamic

The format of the programme, fast-paced and multicentre across Australia, enabled participants to really get to know each other well. The group was welcoming, fun and dynamic, and participants reflected that they learnt a lot from individuals across the cohort.

All voiced that taking time out away from the business is important to allow for development. The leaders reflected that it was incredibly beneficial to have the Vice Chancellors as part of the group:

'Having Vice Chancellors as part of the programme was excellent – exposure to academic conversations provided great insight through hearing Vice Chancellors questions, perspectives and priorities.'

Sarah Setchell, Chief People Officer, University of Derby

Attending visits to five different ATN universities meant the group experienced how different universities presented themselves to an external audience.

Australian universities

The group reflected that there are similarities in many of the challenges facing both Australian and UK universities such as financial sustainability and international student recruitment.

The main difference between the two, is the scale and scope for investment at Australian universities being much larger than in the UK and the group were interested to understand the impact of this. Reflecting on this, the group queried if University Alliance could be used to generate scale, new business and research.

Participants were also interested to hear about the differing organisational and leadership culture in Australian universities.

'It was apparent that leadership and promotion came from those who lead the institutions and institutions change with the change of Vice Chancellor.'

Professor John Latham, Vice Chancellor, Coventry University

Industry links

All participants were particularly impressed by the collaborative engagement models ATN members have with industry partners, especially for research. There was interest in how ATN members are using PhD students can be used to build industry engagement.

'We saw some impressive enterprise and knowledge transfer activity, with some of the ATN universities working at scale, with very productive industry partnerships, and commercialisation activities.'

Professor Craig Gaskell, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Enterprise and Knowledge Exchange, Teesside University

Artificial intelligence

The group were interested in how many ATN members are using AI in a lot of their operations, they reflected that ATN members seem to be further ahead than in the UK and can learn from their progress.

'I was struck by the similarities of challenges colleagues are facing both within the UA group and across ATN members. In Phase 2 of the programme, I look forward to working with the UA group to discuss and debate these challenges whilst visiting and learning from other members' institutions.'
















Professor Mairi Watson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire

Future focus

The Leaders will now go into the second phase of the programme – visiting each other's institutions, enhancing connections and their peer support network. They will build on the study tour, following up on many of the themes introduced. Participants look forward to welcoming ATN and their members to the UK for a reciprocal visit.




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