



# Exploring the Future of Higher Education

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A small, invited group of university leaders and education policy professionals, along with members of the leadership group of the Global Foundation, met to discuss the future of higher education in Australia in an online session hosted by the Foundation on Tuesday 14 November 2023.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of the Australian Government's ongoing higher education review, also known as the Australian Universities Accord, and formed part of the Global Foundation's '**Australian Transformation**' series of discussions.

Key speakers included **Professor Sir Edward Byrne AC**, Chairman of the Australian Advisory Council of the Global Foundation, former President and Vice Chancellor of Monash University and former Principal of King's College London; **Rt Hon Charles Clarke**, Visiting Professor in Social and Educational Futures and former UK Education Secretary of State; and **Mr Ben Rimmer**, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International, Australian Government Department of Education.

The Global Foundation welcomed several other distinguished contributors from the Australian university sector at the meeting, as well as **Dr Mark Cutifani** and **Ms Sharan Burrow AC**, Chair and Deputy Chair of the Global Advisory Council, respectively. The session was moderated by **Mr Steve Howard**, Secretary General.



Prof Sir Edward Byrne AC



Rt Hon Charles Clarke



Mr Ben Rimmer

The discussion was conducted according to Chatham House Rule to maintain free and frank exchange. A summary of key points is below.

There is a perceived disconnect between the university sector and Australian society at large. Some people in the university sector wonder why our universities are not more loved and supported by governments and the wider community. Globally, universities are facing existential questions on their role in society and their value propositions.

Participants observed two competing discourses about higher education in Australia. The first discourse is informed by a "mantra" of "jobs, skills, and productivity." According to this discourse, universities could be more productive, better aligned with the national interest, and more integrated with the business community.



Ms Sharan Burrow AC



Dr Mark Cutifani



Prof Patricia Davidson



Prof Susan Dodds



Prof Bruce S. Downton MB BS MD

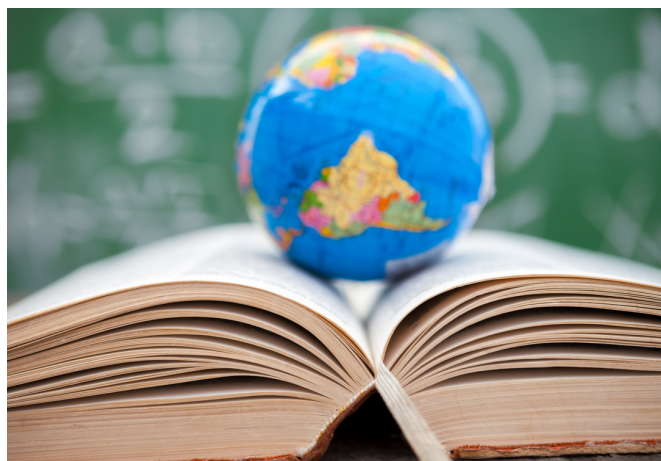


Mr Tim Payne



Prof Grady Venville

Micro-credentials are sometimes promoted as an alternative to degrees. Universities are seen as “ivory towers” disconnected from society and driven by self-interest. This discourse tends to favour more regulation of universities.



The second discourse focuses on the long-term benefits of higher education. Higher education has a greater purpose than preparing young people for the workforce; it also prepares them for the rest of their lives. Universities foster the development of lifelong skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and the use of evidence, all of which benefit society and the functioning of democracy. Through long-term research, they contribute to the development of human knowledge. This discourse tends to favour less regulation of universities and look back fondly at a time when student numbers were small and academics had considerably more freedom.

The tension between these two discourses means that, when Vice Chancellors speak to society, they are often thought to be speaking from a place of self-interest, but when Vice Chancellors speak to their own university communities, they are often met with suspicion and are perceived to be motivated by business interests.

Participants also noted that criticism of universities takes place in a context of anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism, for which universities are only one of several targets.

It was agreed that universities should be key contributors to responding to the rapid changes and challenges facing the globe. These include but are not limited to, transformations in the nature of work, the rise of artificial intelligence, changing demographics, geopolitical conflicts, and climate change and the energy transition. Universities contribute in the following ways:

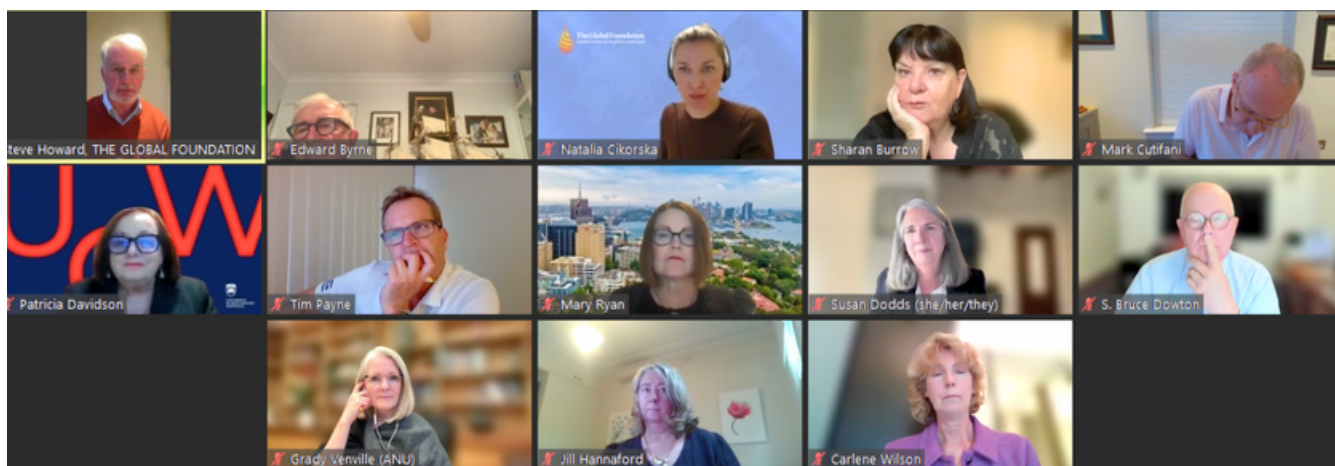
- Producing research to understand and interpret the changes
- Proposing approaches and solutions
- Educating and training young people to address change
- Providing a framework for discussion of change by fostering a well-educated community.

Universities make these contributions well, but not well enough. The solution, however, is not “top-down” hyper-regulation, as has been attempted in the UK with the creation of the Office for Students in 2017. Rather, universities should better lead themselves. At the same time, universities should not be so introspective that they fail to notice external global challenges and learn from the world around them.



Suggestions for improvement raised during the session included:

- Placing life-long learning at the centre of university missions
- Leading internationally collaborative, multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary research aligned with international needs
- A university funding model that supports innovation
- A strong funding base for research, including pure research
- Greater differentiation in the educational offerings of Australian universities
- Addressing equity concerns like high tuition fees
- Involving workers and rural and regional communities in discussions of change.



The session on higher education formed part of the Global Foundation’s **‘Australian Transformation’** series of programs intended to address long-term issues of Australia’s development in a global context.

The series will culminate in a major Foundation event early in 2024, featuring a keynote address by Australian Treasurer, **Dr Jim Chalmers MP**, whose participation will centre on rethinking the future shape and nature of the Australian economy.

Foundation members will be updated on the details of all upcoming programs once they are known.

[A full list of participants can be found here.](#)