

Dr Michael Spence

Current Challenges and Plans for the Future at Sydney University

Our December meeting coincided with the last week in the office for Dr Michael Spence, Vice Chancellor of Sydney University, before his departure to become head of University College London. He stood by his commitment to speak, but his hectic schedule meant he joined us by zoom for a full hour rather than be abbreviated by travel time.

Unfortunately zoom technical issues caused interruptions which were distracting, but did not detract from the interest in his insights on the key challenges being faced by Australian universities in general, and by USyd in particular

He referred to the historic funding of USyd mainly by fees and philanthropy pre 1970, until a period of 30 years when government funding dominated revenue (90% in 1990). By 2019, government contributed only 30% of revenue, with universities pushed to be more self-supporting by attracting fee paying overseas students, both undergraduates and post-graduates.

By end 2019, over 40% of students were from over 140 overseas countries, boosting revenue, enriching campus experience for all, and providing ambassadors for Australia when they return to their countries.

China provides a large portion of the international students in Australia, fitting the global pattern with about 3 times as many students abroad as India, which is in turn about 3 times higher than Germany.

Covid impacted heavily when international travel restrictions stopped flights, and also limited on-campus lectures. Among other initiatives, USYD reacted quickly to boost its online teaching, enabling retention of student numbers and revenue. USYD managed to maintain a much better financial position in 2020 than earlier predicted. It also achieved good student satisfaction feedback. Enrolment applications for 2021 give confidence for a sound financial base, despite Covid.

He addressed two key questions that arise from the covid situation:

- Can Australia afford to do as much research under the current government funding model?
- If funding from international students is down, where does the money come from?

He noted major successes from Covid genetic sequencing and commercialisation of research (Resmed etc), plus recent R&D potential revolutions (plastics recycling, novel battery technology to substitute lithium, wound healing without scarring, addiction treatment, etc). The importance of doing research for Australian conditions and needs was stressed (eg bushfires, Covid, water management), as is the need to create, stimulate and retain clever people.

In recent years, there has not been an appetite for government funding, but, accentuated by the Covid situation, he advocated this should change to capture the benefits of research for Australia and the world.

Philanthropy will be especially important in providing funding.

Funding is critical because, although cost savings are rigorously pursued, cost pressures abound for very modern equipment (including data processing, etc) and facilities for:

- Research (where there is a lot of focus now on multidisciplinary work) and
- Teaching (where ancillary services, health requirements and serving other student needs are substantial)

Q&A addressed many other key issues associated with universities these days:

- Academic freedom is seen differently depending on one's place on the political spectrum. Steering a reasonable course on free speech is a challenge, with reactionary social media adding to the difficulty of encouraging balanced academic debate, and with some media distorting the real situation. Teaching people to disagree well is a key part of encouraging tolerance and respect for other opinions.
- Business education is different to many overseas universities, as there is strong demand for this in undergraduate courses, while also noting the high proportion of overseas students. For its post-graduate course, USyd strives to balance between the Harvard (case study) and Oxford (academic) models.
- The number, scope and differentiation of tertiary education campuses (including in regions) need to be considered to ensure the nation's requirements are met. For instance, there may be scope for structures to boost skills in the technical space between some engineering courses and TAFE trade training.

John Carter thanked the VC for his insights and his contribution to the development of USyd, which was attended by so many of our members, and conveyed our best wishes for his new responsibilities at UCL

Kate May then informed us about the university's engagement with its alumni and the community. Some examples were given of the generosity by various contributors who have helped enhance USyd's facilities and academic achievements. She also issued a welcome for members to visit the newly opened Chau Chak Wing Museum, as arranged for Tuesday 16th February

For further background, alumni can contact kate.may@sydney.edu.au

or the VC's Farewell Oration can be heard on:

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2020/11/19/dr-michael-spences-farewell-oration.html>