



VC'S VIEWPOINT: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – IS ESSENTIAL BUT BE WARY OF THE CHALLENGES

PROFESSOR TIM BRAILSFORD



Professor Tim Brailsford has served as the Vice Chancellor and President of Bond University in Australia since 2012. His previous university experience includes terms as Dean at the University of Queensland and Australian National University, and various academic positions at the University of Melbourne and Monash University. Professor Brailsford was appointed as the inaugural Frank Finn Professor of Finance at

the University of Queensland in recognition of his research achievements. He also has experience on several boards and professional committees including the first Australian to be appointed to the global board of AACSB and the global board of the European Foundation for Management Development. Brailsford is also an active contributor to the profession having held positions on the Professional Education Board of CPA Australia; past President of the Accounting and Finance Association of Australia & New Zealand; past President of the Australian Business Deans Council; and past President of the Association of Asia-Pacific Business Schools. He holds professional qualifications as a Senior Fellow of the Financial Services Institute of Australasia, Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management and Fellow of CPA Australia.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – IS ESSENTIAL BUT BE WARY OF THE CHALLENGES

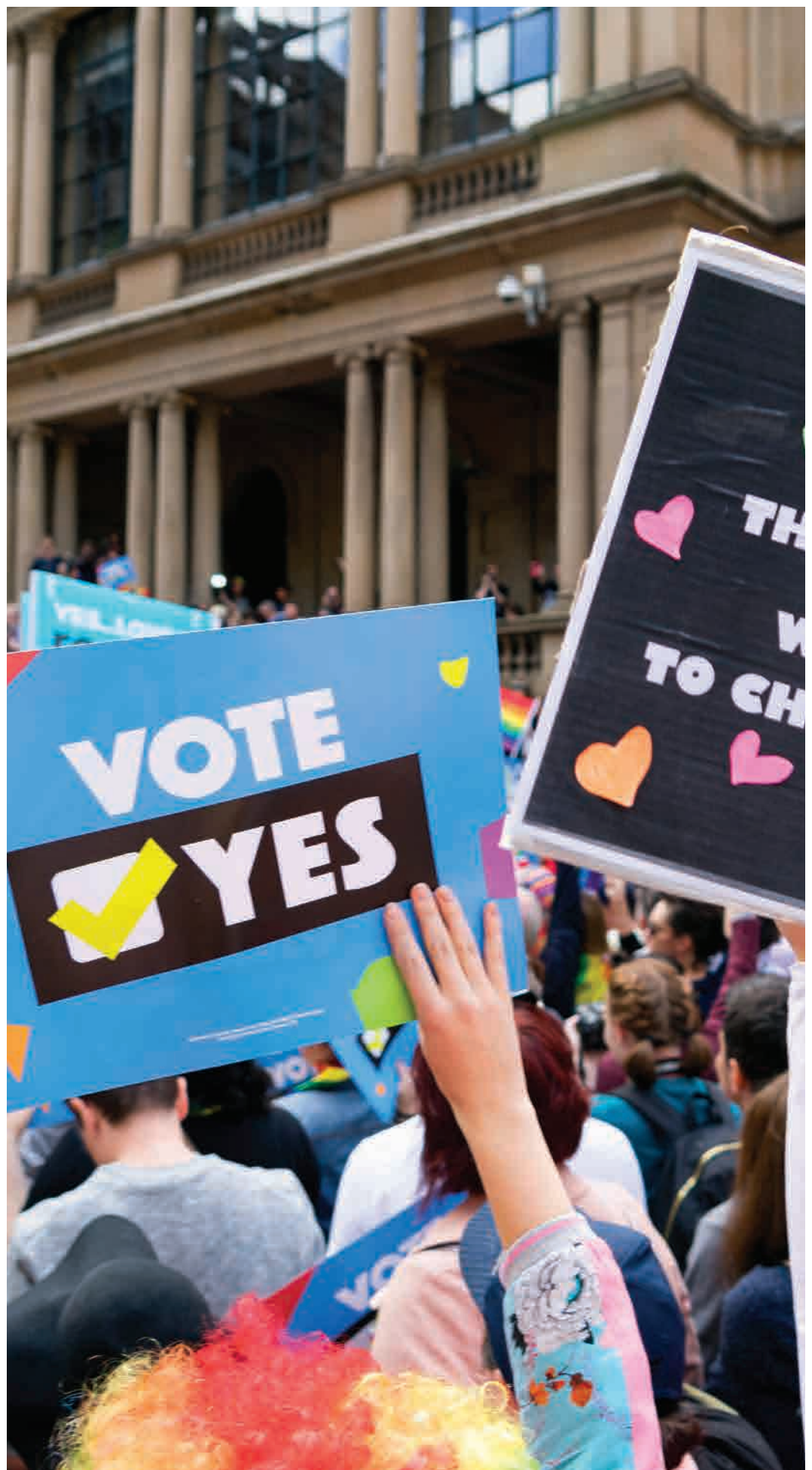
Universities are often the bedrock of local

communities. Our students and staff are part of our institutional community and also a vital part of the wider community. Through them we provide economic benefits at the local level, and we cultivate innovation and promote development in society at all levels - locally, nationally and internationally.

Community engagement is a core activity for every university. However, the recent spike in political activism across campuses particularly in the United States raises some challenging dilemmas for university management teams across the globe. Universities have always been a lightning rod for contentious issues and vigorous debate, but the recent escalation of violence around public unrest will surely be testing the tolerance of various US College Presidents.

The shocking events in August this year at Charlottesville where a demonstration turned into tragedy is a reminder to us all that strong differences in views and values can quickly escalate. This incident began on the grounds of the University of Virginia and while the University had plans in place to respond to the protests, the scale of the violence reached such a level that the Governor of Virginia declared a state of emergency.

In Australia we have also seen controversies that have sparked demonstrations and protests. Government policy changes that increase tuition costs have always motivated students to march in the streets, and recent events have proved the rule. On some campuses, the investments in fossil fuel stocks by some universities have ignited passionate views. A visit by the Dalai Lama likewise stirred controversy,



and then there is the ongoing debate around issues such as antisemitism, alternative medicine, fundamentalists and vaccination.

At their heart, universities must support the principle of free speech as a fundamental tenant. The very nature of our research agendas is based on objective inquiry and requires us to ask questions that challenge the status quo. Where would we be if Christopher Columbus had never set sail in 1492 and proved the world to be round!

Many doctoral theses have been written on the topic of freedom of speech. One thing we know is that the vast majority of society stand firmly in support of the concept – that is until they disagree with what someone has said. The challenge for our universities is that it is inevitable that some people will disagree with what someone has said at some point. Our diversity of backgrounds, views and values mean that complete consensus on every issue is a utopian dream.

So, how far should universities go to engage the community and ensure that everyone's voice is heard?

Community engagement comes in many shapes and forms. Community groups and associations often use university campuses and the associated infrastructure at very generous rates, if not pro-bono. The vast majority of these groups mean well and come and go without a sniff of trouble or controversy. However, should universities vet groups before allowing them on campus? At what point does a university say no, and take a position on a particular issue by restricting the promotion of an unpalatable view?

Often community groups are already connected with the university, typically through students or staff. Hence, if a community group feels disenfranchised then the university can incur the wrath of its internal stakeholders. These issues often involve long histories and strong emotions, and there are no simple solutions or quick fixes.



Any community engagement strategy is bound to enter an occasional minefield, but a clear understanding of principles and a consistent approach to each issue will assist in successfully navigating the path.

Some universities have adopted a firm stance that all-comers are welcome and that their institution embraces freedom of speech above all other considerations. This approach provides for a straightforward policy, but there are risks of brand association with undesirable groups and alienating sections of the community.

Other institutions have taken a more cautious approach to co-branding and

external activities by utilising some form of filtering mechanism, often through a central office for engagement. However, this approach introduces a layer of bureaucracy and cost, and inhibits a university's ability to respond quickly. Moreover, as a university grows in size it becomes more difficult to control all forms of engagement from a single, central office.

Nothing here is new. Universities have grappled through the centuries with arguments over intellectual freedom. The issues often cut deep into the core of an institution's autonomy and independence. Universities have stood firm over the years and generally succeeded in separating the rigorous pursuit of ideas from political agendas, matters of faith, and paths of political correctness.

However, arguably the ground has shifted over more recent years.

First, the advent of the 24/7 news cycle and the expansion of social media platforms has led to an ever-present vigil over campus life. Events, activities and conversations that were once contained within the walls of our universities are now the mainstream of tweets, blogs and social commentary.

Second, as the sector has become increasingly reliant on a variety of non-Government sources of revenue, it has also become accountable to a wider group of stakeholders and their interests. The influence of outsiders into university life cannot be denied.

Third, the rise of populist politics has led to an environment where airwaves and agendas can rapidly become dominated by echo chambers that lecture us on right from wrong. Notions of ambiguity, shades



of grey, and multi-faceted perspectives can get lost in a populist stance where black is black and white is as pure as driven snow.

We encourage our students to think, to immerse themselves in societal issues and appreciate the big picture, to engage with the local community and interact with others, and to speak up. Why then would we want to gag them when they do not tow the institutional line, or encourage them to dis-associate with particular points of view, or even forbid them from engaging with some particular groups? These are challenging questions that every university will face at some point.

Like many of their overseas counterparts, Australian universities have always embraced their responsibility to the community. This has been manifest through the development of community educational programs; research outcomes that benefit society; infrastructure for use by schools, sporting clubs and community associations; sponsorship for community and sporting clubs; and access to experts to assist and advise on boards, task forces and projects. But perhaps

above all, universities have led the way in demonstrating that contentious debates need to be evidence-based, respectful and conducted in a civilised manner.

As we all struggle with the rise of extremists at various levels and on various topics, we must continue to ask how universities best serve the needs of their communities. There is a fine line between embracing our communities and being perceived as isolated and uncaring.

Any community engagement strategy is bound to enter an occasional minefield, but a clear understanding of principles and a consistent approach to each issue will assist in successfully navigating the path. An almost certain pitfall is to assume that the personal values and opinions of those individuals at the top, such as the University Council and management leadership team, should automatically direct the institution as a whole.

Bond University has faced this challenge since its inception. As the nation's first private, non-profit and independent university, Bond has run the gauntlet of

Governments of all persuasions and their varied agendas. Despite these challenges, Bond has remained steadfast in its focus on supporting independent thinking amongst our students, and developing graduates who are capable of analysing, distilling and comprehending complex arguments. This philosophy of “students first” enables Bond University to be consistent when prioritising competing agendas.

If it has not happened already, Directors of Engagement will soon find themselves devoting more time to balancing the conflicting interests within their communities, because the current environment of ambiguity, divided causes, populism and extremism will not quieten any time soon. However, despite the challenges, a strong commitment to community engagement will continue to serve any university well with the caveat that, as is always the case, a strategy is only successful if executed well.