

The Purpose of an Australian Catholic University

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Acknowledgements

I am humbled by the presence of all of you who have gathered here today. Let me begin with some thanks and acknowledgments.

This is the land of the Wurundjeri Peoples from the Kulin Nation who have cared for the lands and waterways for many generations. In the spirit of reconciliation, I pay my respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

Special thanks to the His Grace Archbishop Peter Comensoli for the wonderful Mass of welcome in St Patrick's Cathedral earlier tonight.

I acknowledge members of Corporation, Senate, and Victorian Chapter, ACU colleagues, alumni, and students.

A special mention to the Acting Chancellor, Mr Julien O'Connell, thank you for your guidance and friendship.

To my predecessor, Professor Greg Craven, I acknowledge you warmly this evening and I trust you are watching us from afar.

A big thank you to the whole ACU community for the support and encouragement you have given me since my appointment was first announced.

To my fellow vice-chancellors and academic peers from other universities – thank you for being here tonight.

A special welcome to my family and friends – those of you who are here with us today, and those who are joining us online from overseas.

Introduction

For migrants, life often feels like one life-long pilgrimage – always moving, occasionally pausing, but always engulfed with a sense of impermanency. It is therefore not surprising that I have developed a sense of affinity with many places: Melbourne is one of them.

It is a city dear to my heart. A place where my wife Marta and I lived for several years when we were enjoying our working lives at Monash University.

It is great to be back here. And it is truly a privilege to stand before you all to deliver my inaugural lecture as the fourth Vice-Chancellor of Australian Catholic University.

You may think that this is a rather unfortunate time to assume the leadership of a university. Over the past year in Australia, there has been an unusually high level of turnover among university vice-chancellors. Perhaps this is an indication that the smarter ones have chosen to leave.

What does this say about those of us who have only just accepted the mantle of university leadership? Perhaps you can draw only one simple conclusion.

The year 2020 certainly presented us all with challenges, and the consequences will continue to reverberate for quite some time. But if you were to ask me what lesson I have taken from that year, I believe that it is that we should never underestimate the importance of human connection.

We can never favour separation over union, or isolation over relationship.

Although things may be quite different for our university in the future, we should always remember that we are one community with one mission.

Standing here this evening, I am acutely aware that I am in front of a number of different audiences. All are likely to have different expectations as to what I will be speaking about.

This is merely the beginning of a conversation. One which I am happy to continue engaging with – from a Catholic or indeed any other perspective. Tonight, I can only ask that you join me on this journey and see this as an opportunity for openness and dialogue.

This lecture is a condensed version of what will ultimately be a more comprehensive essay. Both are titled *The Purpose of an Australian Catholic University*.

When he delivered his own inaugural lecture in 2008, my predecessor Professor Greg Craven spoke eloquently of the idea of an Australian Catholic university. In this important address, he argued that a Catholic university must be supremely good at two things: being Catholic and being a university. Grounding his exposition in the works of John Henry Newman, he outlined the characteristics needed for a university to be truly considered a place of Catholic higher learning.

My own inaugural lecture will start where Professor Craven left off. Where he spoke of the *idea* of an Australian Catholic university, I would like to present the next chapter of the same book and shift our focus to the *purpose* of an Australian Catholic university. That is, what is our role in a practical sense and how do we enact our mission? Both here and now, and in the future.

I will begin with some personal reflections on finding purpose – in terms of my own journey and the ACU journey. I would then like us to consider the meaning of the ACU mission and the core values which inform our work as an Australian Catholic university, before reflecting on

what I believe to be our purpose within the current social and economic environment. Here, I will argue that our purpose can be found in three key areas: In our approach to scholarship and academic pursuit – consistent with the Catholic intellectual tradition; in our capacity to teach and practice global responsibility and global citizenship; and, via our commitment to serve and lead in a manner which facilitates the transformation of others.

But before I commence: ‘Remember we are but travellers here’. These are the words inscribed on the tomb of our patron saint. We are here for a short time, and while we are here, we must find and live our purpose.

So, let us first remember Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop – the patron saint of Australian Catholic University. During her life journey, her faith and courage called her to make a positive difference to the lives of others. She faced many challenges, but her commitment to serving others proved stronger than the adversities she experienced. Her life of service reminds us of the power of dedication to a found purpose.

Finding Purpose

When commencing a dialogue on a particular topic, Greek philosophers would typically start with a question of meaning. So, in the same tradition, I would like to begin by asking the question: What is purpose?

I believe that purpose is an expression of our values and our capabilities, and that when we work to find and fulfill our moral purpose, we flourish. But this task isn’t simple. Discovering and achieving our purpose is a journey. As we grow older, and hopefully wiser, as circumstances change and opportunities emerge, it is possible to see a potential in ourselves that we may not have seen before.

Thirty years ago, in 1991, I began a journey – one which would change my life. My wife and I moved to Australia from overseas so that I might undertake a PhD as an international student at Flinders University.

Looking back, ours was an experience that many international students can relate to. We arrived with two pieces of luggage and hardly any savings. It was a strange country, with strange customs, and a profound absence of good coffee. Our first child was born less than a year after we arrived, and being on a scholarship, this was a period of significant hardship for us as a young family.

I am not sure if we would have done quite as well as we did, without the support of our family and the community which sustained us. I shall be forever grateful to the people – some of whom are here tonight – who so generously welcomed us and befriended us.

The bonds of friendship which we developed during that time, are still strong, and are still so important to both of us. As a foreign student I felt out of place culturally, linguistically, and academically. Not only did I feel personally cast adrift – this feeling also pervaded my academic experience. But it was through forming connections with others, that I overcame this sense of otherness.

I also found that having a thoughtful, generous, and supportive mentor can make a world of difference. My PhD supervisor, Professor Bob Holton, was a model supervisor and continues to be my hero – one of several who have helped me along on my academic journey. He taught me how to think in a disciplined, yet creative, way. He encouraged my independence while always being there when I was lost. He waited when I desperately needed time, yet he pushed when he knew there was no alternative. Most importantly, he guided with intellect dressed in humanity.

Coming to Australia was a critical turning point in my life – one which changed my perspective, offered me many incredible opportunities, and helped me to find my own purpose.

Importantly, I discovered my desire to engage in meaningful scholarship. I found my intellectual home at Flinders University which, at that time, was a thriving hub of outstanding sociologists.

But I did have good foundations before arriving in Australia. My interest in intellectual inquiry began when I was a first-year philosophy student at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. One of the classes I took was titled *Introduction to German Classical Philosophy* and was given by a charismatic academic, Professor Mladen Dolar who spent the entire semester interpreting the preface to Hegel's seminal *Phenomenology of Mind*.

Let's just say that Hegel isn't everyone's cup of tea. His writing is painfully dry and hard to digest, but Professor Dolar simply started with the first paragraph and never deviated far from it throughout the semester.

The first paragraph of the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind* is quite an introduction to academia. In it, Hegel, argues that a philosophical work should never really start with the preface, but start with the philosophical argument itself. The irony here is that the preface is about 40 pages long and was the focus of the entire semester.

With a simple anchor in the preface, Professor Dolar introduced me to the world of modern philosophy: from Napoleonic political history and the Battle of Jena, to Kojève, Heidegger, and Marcuse.

I have never forgotten my encounter with Professor Dolar. He showed me that knowledge and the beauty of intellectual discovery are inseparable. From that encounter with Hegel's Preface, curated through the whirlwind that was Dolar's intellectual and passionate mind, I realised that I wanted to develop his gift of sparking intellectual curiosity in others and passing on that passion for discovery. And although I may never quite ascend to his heights, I hope that I never stop trying.

It may seem that I am being self-indulgent by telling you this personal story. But as we all know, the personal is consequential.

I am forever grateful to that person who had faith in my ability and signed a scholarship letter which brought me to Australia. In fact, it became my singular ambition to be someone who enables the educational journey of others.

This gave me purpose – driven from personal experience and gratitude, as well as the realisation that I had skills and talents to achieve this. I entered academia and was eventually offered roles in senior leadership. It was at that point that I started signing domestic and international scholarship offer letters – just like the one that I had received. Over 10 years I would have signed thousands of these letters. And thousands of PhD students from all corners of the globe were able to pursue their aspirations. I was fortunate enough to be able to help send them on their own journey of discovery.

Thirty years ago, this university also began a journey. On 1 January 1991, after considerable effort on the part of its founding members, ACU opened its doors as a publicly funded Catholic university.

Despite some reservation and concern that an Australian Catholic university would not survive – let alone excel – ACU has achieved both. It has delivered on the promise made by its founders to foster and promote teaching and research in accordance with the Catholic intellectual tradition, and to serve the local and world community.

For three decades, ACU students have been provided a values-based education consistent with the Catholic ethos. ACU has positively changed the lives of many – through its educational offerings, its research, and its engagement activities.

Over this time, ACU's previous Vice-Chancellors: Peter Drake, Peter Sheehan and Greg Craven, were each distinctive in their leadership of ACU, and each were responding to the unique challenges of their time. They were, however, consistent in their commitment to its growth and success, and their collective legacy has delivered us to this point.

As we begin the next leg of the ACU journey, it will be my privilege to help build upon that legacy.

Our Mission

A Catholic university is distinguished by fundamental principles and a repository of knowledge which have developed from a 2,000-year-old tradition of Christian intellectual endeavour and discovery.

This is a living tradition.

Each generation has expanded upon the culture and understandings of those who came before them, and this has allowed the tradition to grow, strengthen, and flourish. It is the foundation upon which we engage in academic pursuit and fulfil our connection to the Church, and is also the basis of the ACU mission statement:

Within the Catholic intellectual tradition and acting in Truth and Love, Australian Catholic University is committed to the pursuit of knowledge, the dignity of the human person and the common good.

These foundational values inform who we are as an institution, what we believe in, and what we do. If they are not deeply embedded in our activities, we cannot, and should not, claim to be a Catholic university.

To act in Truth and Love is to act with compassion, integrity, and in service to the wellbeing of others. The Catholic intellectual tradition asks that, when searching for Truth, we maintain an ongoing dialogue between faith and reason.

It is often assumed that these two concepts are mutually exclusive, or that one must dominate the other. But as St Thomas Aquinas argued, the ability to reason is a gift from God and does not conflict with our faith. Faith is in fact strengthened through the search for Truth.

The Catholic university is a vital setting, a meeting point, for faith and reason to flourish. The strength of both allows us to form a more complete understanding of human experience and the world around us. Within the Catholic academic context, intellectual freedom is critical and allows new ideas and new perspectives to be explored and tested. This, in turn, encourages the advancement of the Catholic intellectual tradition. But this is subject to an important caveat: that the dignity of the human person and the common good are always held paramount.

As Catholics, we know that the human person possesses an inherent worth. And, as the Church's social doctrine states, a just society can only become a reality when it is based on the respect of the dignity of the human person.

With an emphasis on interconnectedness and solidarity, the common good is another aspect of Catholic Social Teaching. We are reminded that the decisions we make, and the actions we take, are to be for the benefit of all and not just for ourselves. We must also remember that, as a Catholic university, we have arisen from the heart of the Church. In line with our Constitution, we are inextricably connected to the Catholic Church and its Christian message.

In 1990, just months prior to the opening of ACU, Pope John Paul II issued the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* which articulates the role of a Catholic university in the contemporary context. It outlines the obligation of a Catholic university to protect and advance the Catholic intellectual tradition.

It also explains how the duty of a Catholic university is one of service and leadership. This is the responsibility of all Catholic universities. But how it is fulfilled by an individual university, is contingent upon that institution's cultural identity, charism, and strengths. It also depends on that university's particular temporal, social, and geographical context.

This is where a Catholic university finds its purpose.

Our Purpose

Over the past three decades, ACU has grown and matured. We are discovering who we are and learning what we are capable of.

We now have nine campuses including our newly opened Blacktown campus as well as a campus in Rome. We have a strong research reputation, and we produce graduates who are confident in themselves and their abilities. Our commitment to community has meant that we have been able to make meaningful and positive changes to the lives of others.

We are older and wiser, circumstances have changed, and opportunities have most definitely emerged. We see potential in ourselves that we did not see before.

Now is an opportunity for us to reflect on how we express our mission values.

In other words – what can we, as an Australian Catholic university do, to advance the pursuit of knowledge, human dignity, and the common good, at this time and in this place?

If purpose is an expression of one's values and capabilities – What is our purpose?

When I was installed as Vice-Chancellor last month, Archbishop Fisher in his homily challenged me to integrate 'the highly innovative world of the contemporary academy and the timeless foundation for the university that is the Church'. This is an ongoing challenge for the vice-chancellor of any Catholic university. Navigating both the contemporary and the traditional. Negotiating the past, the present, and the future.

I have previously spoken of the need for ACU to have a stable core and a disruptive edge. For me, this means fulfilling our mission whilst proactively transforming to meet the demands of our changing times, particularly when our environment is in flux. And our university sector is undeniably in a state of flux.

Even before 2020, higher education was experiencing fast-paced changes. Online course providers were challenging the traditional methods of education delivery. The international student market had boomed to unprecedented levels, and many universities were relying on the added revenue to accelerate their capital projects, their talent acquisition, and their research. There had also been alterations to government funding models.

These developments were mainly positive, but they also revealed underlying vulnerabilities in existing operating models. These included a lack of willingness (or ability) to meet market demands, a slow uptake of digital pedagogies, and an over-reliance on certain sources of revenue – to name but a few. On top of this, pandemic-induced upheavals such as revenue shortfalls, reduced student numbers, and changes in how we work and teach, have caused a tectonic shift in the sector.

Whilst we can expect some level of recovery, we can safely assume that this is the end of business as usual. And even if we did have the opportunity to return to pre COVID-19 operations, in many ways we would probably choose not to.

The future is difficult to predict, and it is hard to know how all of these factors will ultimately affect us. But what is certain, is that Australian universities will have to revisit their

opportunity horizons. They must transform and be transformative. And so must ACU. But what cannot change, and will not change, is our mission.

An Australian Catholic university has a critical role to play in the higher education sector. A role that keeps the dignity of the human person and the common good at the forefront of all considerations. Ours is a vastly talented academic community who are committed to delivering positive social outcomes, and I truly admire their skills and expertise. As such, ACU possesses the breadth and depth of intellectual capability to explore and address the issues facing our world today.

I would propose that, to remain faithful to the fundamental tenets of our mission, and be relevant in the current environment, we must harness our skills and nurture our capabilities in three key areas;

- Catholic scholarship,
- Global citizenship, and
- Service leadership

These are areas which are ‘of the moment’ – areas where we can have the most influence and most impact in the contemporary context.

By holding these as our purpose objectives we can achieve something that is our *raison d'être*: to align the enactment of our mission with the key challenges of the modern era.

Catholic Scholarship

Catholic scholarship is the cornerstone of our mission.

Here, I mean engaging in intellectual pursuits which serve and benefit others, sharing the sense of accomplishment which can be experienced through academic endeavour, and undertaking our teaching and research in a manner consistent with the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Regarding our education proposition, the environment we find ourselves in demands that we provide our students with more than just a qualification. It requires us to prepare them for challenges which may not yet be fully apparent and help them to develop a keen sense of who they are, and where they fit, in this ever-changing world.

Even before the social and economic instability brought about by the global pandemic, we were acutely aware that technological advancements, demographic shifts, and environmental challenges meant the world would undergo significant change.

We must prepare our students for a lifetime of ruptures and turns. Here lies our opportunity and our responsibility as a Catholic university. It is the growth of the whole person through a student-centered educational experience steeped in our mission values. And it is helping our students to develop personally, intellectually, and ethically, by offering them a learning experience which is both holistic and values based.

Our graduates most definitely need to be employable, market-relevant and equipped with the skills and knowledge required to meet the demands of the future, but importantly, it is our role to support them in becoming socially conscious and ethically minded so they might grow and flourish. Particularly when the world around them is uncertain and perhaps even chaotic.

A university with a strong research reputation has a license to make a difference. In research, our role is defined by understanding and preserving the spirit of humanity. Especially in relation to new realities and new risks.

More than three decades ago German sociologist Ulrich Beck articulated this imperative in his seminal text *Risk Society* where he argues that advancements intended to make our lives easier and safer, are also exposing us to new risks and dangers – some of which are yet to be fully realised or understood.

This is not to say that technological advancements should be opposed. On the contrary. But as we explore new frontiers, there is a need to continually and critically evaluate the effects of new advancements on individuals, communities, and environments. To ensure that they are truly and wholly benefiting human wellbeing.

ACU's strengths and insights will enable it to make a concrete contribution towards addressing the social issues which threaten humanity.

For example:

- The consequences of the current pandemic on peoples' mental health, educational ambitions, and employment aspirations.
- Humanitarian injustices including modern day slavery, poverty, and displacement.
- Or the impact of climate change on lifestyles and livelihoods.

Global Citizenship

Global citizenship is the second area where we can harness and strengthen our skills.

In his papal encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis speaks of a vision in which the life of every person on earth has value, and where the global common good is protected. Although we all may have differing priorities, different cultures, and different beliefs – he reminds us that we are a single human family.

I have committed much of my research to the concepts of global citizenship, cosmopolitanism, and global responsibility. These concepts are interrelated. They have a common origin in the Greek word *kosmopolitēs* – a notion attributed to Greek philosopher Diogenes, who professed a sense of responsibility and loyalty towards the global community, when he claimed to be 'a citizen of the world'.

In more contemporary times, a new generation of theorists have been engaging with the concepts of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship.

Often, this work has been predicated on understandings of openness, the moral obligations of hospitality, and the importance of humanitarian concern.

It is a perspective that asks us to look beyond ourselves and our immediate circles, to see that our actions not only have local consequences, but can profoundly affect people, communities, and environments far removed from us.

Such an outlook is crucial for resolving the many issues that afflict our world – such as food and energy security, displacement, and the unfair distribution of resources.

Of course, global citizenship extends to the need to care for our planet. We are part of a broader ecological framework, and our responsibility to the environment is one of stewardship.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals underline the fact that environmental issues are having a serious impact on humanity – particularly on poorer communities. They have also highlighted the need for action to address these challenges.

The Sustainable Development Goals are, of course, consistent with those of Catholic stewardship and those outlined by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, in that they have made a clear association between the need to care for the planet and the need to act in the interests of the common good. Our role is to harness our intellectual capacity by ensuring that our teaching, research, and engagement activities contribute meaningfully to the types of system-level changes called for, in both of these important documents.

Global citizenship involves a set of skills, outlooks, and practices which allow individuals to confidently and competently move between the familiar and the unfamiliar and enable them to engage in issues of global concern.

This is where education comes in.

The development of a global outlook in our students must be one of our key objectives and we must equip our graduates with the tools and competencies needed to responsibly navigate life in our increasingly complex and rapidly changing global environment.

Such competencies should be underpinned by a clear set of guiding ethical principles –

- A responsibility towards the broader global community,
- Openness towards other cultures, values and experiences,
- Compassion towards the suffering of others,
- And a commitment to act within one's power to oppose injustice, inequality, and the destruction of the environment.

Crucially we cannot just talk the talk – we must walk the walk and strengthen these global competencies via our research agenda and our engagement activities.

To achieve this, we would want to ensure that our researchers are firmly embedded in international networks and working to help tackle key global challenges.

I would also like to see us developing more partnerships and collaborations with likeminded institutions in the Asia Pacific region and beyond so that we can contribute to bringing about positive change to the lives of others at the global level.

Service Leadership

Service leadership is the third capability we must nurture to enact our mission. Through Truth and Love we serve, and through Truth and Love we lead.

The concept of service leadership is, of course, not new. It is used in both religious and secular spheres. But from this viewpoint the focus is understanding others, honouring others, and forming authentic relationships based on compassion and respect.

In the Christian story, this is perhaps most starkly portrayed when Christ washes the feet of His disciples at the Last Supper. In this act of humility, we see an example of true servant leadership.

Among the ACU alumni, I know of some wonderful individuals who are incredibly inspirational models of this type of leadership.

For example:

- Anne-Marie Reddan, co-founder and Director of Yimba Uganda, who has wholeheartedly committed to helping vulnerable young people.

By offering them the opportunity to learn skills for building a strong and sustainable future for themselves, Anne-Marie has shown these young people in Uganda how they might become leaders in their own communities.

- Christine Shanahan, who has used her skills in nursing to serve and work with communities affected by poverty and conflict in countries such as Sudan, Timor Leste, and Turkmenistan.

In living out her calling, she responded to the needs of the sick and vulnerable and has helped alleviate the suffering of many people.

- Dr Derek Chong, Queensland's first Indigenous psychiatrist, who has worked to improve the practice of caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

His commitment to providing care, imparting knowledge, and advocating for education has helped many individuals and models a life of service.

These are members of our very own ACU community who truly epitomise the concept of servant leadership.

So how can we as an Australian Catholic university strengthen our institutional capacity to lead through service?

Service leadership is motivated by compassion. A commitment to journey with others, understand their perspectives, and offer them support when required. If we do not fully appreciate the perspective of others, or the circumstances of those who we claim we are wanting to serve, then we cannot act in their interests.

Good communication is also required. The phrase ‘good leaders are good listeners’ holds true. To be a truly apt servant of others, one must listen to what is required. This involves engaging in dialogue which is open and genuine, promoting opportunities for honest and authentic interaction.

Genuine service leadership also facilitates growth and transformation. If we are putting the interests of others first, we will genuinely want to see them succeed and grow in their endeavours through encouragement and enablement. We respect their dignity by helping them realise their potential. Their success will be our success.

Importantly, we should remember that service leadership is not exclusively the responsibility of those in formal positions of authority. It is a collective effort. We are all leaders in our own way, within our own domain.

This should be evident across the whole of the institution, and everyone should be supported in their leadership development. Giving every member of the university community - students and staff – the opportunity to lead in line with their own capabilities, their capacity, and purpose. Allowing the university itself to grow and flourish.

Final Thoughts

‘Remember we are but travellers here’.

We are not here forever, but the time we are here matters. What we do with that time matters. We are all travelling our own life journey, but at this time, at this place, our paths have converged. We are working together as a community to achieve a shared purpose.

I commit to leading ACU into a future where it will be supremely good at being a university and being Catholic, and where it will enact its mission through Catholic scholarship, global citizenship, and service leadership.

It is my hope that this will be a future where we make an important and necessary contribution to the Australian higher education landscape. And where all who study and work here will proudly proclaim their connection to our wonderful Australian Catholic University.

Thursday 22 April 2021
Philippa Brazil Theatre
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Campus