

# ENGAGING AND Educating

Macquarie University is leading the higher-education sector with an innovative vision of service and engagement.

Images courtesy of Macquarie University

A mission of service and engagement will shape the future of Macquarie University as the higher-education institution looks for dynamic and diverse ways to serve and engage not only students and staff but suppliers, partners, and industry and government bodies.

This unique approach has been spearheaded by the university's new Vice-Chancellor, Professor Bruce Dowton. Before joining Macquarie in 2012, Bruce held a range of positions in university, healthcare, and consulting organisations. As vice-chancellor, Bruce is responsible for the university's academic, research, administrative, financial, and development strategies.

*The CEO Magazine* sat down with Bruce to discuss his forward-thinking strategies for the university and how these new ideas may form the future foundation of the Australian university sector.

***The CEO Magazine:* What was your journey to becoming vice-chancellor of Macquarie University?**

**Bruce:** I've had an eclectic career, largely in academic medicine, starting as a medical student in Australia but leaving shortly after medical school to head to the United States to the Boston Children's Hospital to train as a paediatrician.

While there, I became involved in clinical work and research with a doctoral degree in molecular biology. I also had the opportunity to assume a significant leadership role at an early stage in my career by moving to Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, where I became the head of medical genetics at a big children's hospital in St Louis and Washington University.

After that, I came back to Australia to become the Dean of Medicine at the University of New South Wales for seven years. I then went back to Boston and assumed the role of

COO of a small non-profit organisation owned by Harvard University, and then Partners Healthcare System. That involved undertaking international healthcare and higher-education consulting all over the world.

I wasn't really seeking to go back to Australia when one of the executive search firms found me in the US. As I quickly learned more about where Macquarie University was at just over a year ago, I became extremely tantalised by a university that was in a very unique place in its journey of development. The opportunity to come and lead this institution was too good to pass up.

**Since becoming vice-chancellor, how have you engaged and communicated with employees?**

I think my style is focused on being out and about. When I first arrived, I spent a lot of time meeting people, often informally rather than in formally scheduled meetings. We engaged more than 800 staff in 40 different >



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meetings that I was involved in in a formal sense.

I usually get out at a different entrance to the university each day if I can and walk through the campus, stopping to greet and talk to students and staff along the way. I make it my business a couple of times a week to eat in the campus hub where there's a whole range of food options. I buy lunch and find someone who looks interesting, whether I know them or not, and just sit down and start a little conversation with them. I don't like sitting in my office and being secluded from the front-line work of the university; I like being out and about in the community of the university.

I've received an extraordinarily warm welcome from the university and its students and staff. Universities are sometimes characterised by fiefdoms with different parts of the university not being engaged across the whole organisation. As I've wandered around and gotten to know people over the year and a half that I've been here, I've been very impressed by the warmth of the welcome that I've received from the university.

I'm also finding that my style of engagement encourages members of the university to be authentic towards me. I receive emails or communications from folks across the university about serious things that they've got on their minds. They bring their thoughts and concerns to me in a very thoughtful, considered way, which I appreciate very much. I work on responding in an equally thoughtful way.

## What have been the major milestones for the university and its development in recent years?

My predecessor, Steven Schwartz, led the university through a major repositioning to grow research and that was very successful. Macquarie University is now counted among Australia's leading research universities. We have the metrics to substantiate that and that's really



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occurred over the past eight or nine years.

We've continued that under my leadership. We've also taken a pause in some ways to really step out and look at the far horizon, considering where we want to end up as a university beyond the traditional five- and 10-year plans. I have a somewhat jaundiced view of classical strategic planning, with the belief that organisations must have aspirations about the long term as well as know what they stand for, what they mean, and how they can be true to the compass that they set for themselves.

We've done that now in a very complicated planning process over the past year, and we've agreed upon aspiring to be a university of service and engagement, focused on deeply serving our internal community of students and staff, while also serving wider society and the large problems that confront the world today. We want to do that in a way that engages people in a very broad, deep, and meaningful way, not just internally, but increasing the porosity of the boundaries of the university so

that we can really engage with corporate partners, non-government organisations, and government in a much more dynamic way than most universities have been able to achieve.

With a backdrop of terrific performance in growing research over the past eight years, we continue to strive towards that. We have also gathered around as a community of the university and set an aspiration for the very long term. As a result, we're now doing a number of things from re-deriving our research plan for the next five years to a major piece of work to redevelop our brand experience. Everything that we do as a university is now gathered underneath this far-horizon aspiration around service and engagement.

## How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to improve your students' educational experience?

In a variety of different ways. There are many different touchpoints and avenues where the university engages with suppliers and partners. >





One of the most direct examples is PACE, our professional and community engagement program where students earn real academic credit for work they do outside the university. We have an office on campus which works with industry organisations, commercial organisations, professional firms, non-government organisations, city councils, and volunteer groups through partners both in Australia and all over the world to help students gain a robust experience for academic credit.

It's not just about an internship where they might go and have a not-for-credit experience, but working in a partner organisation. This is for academic credit with a set of milestones negotiated with the student by the academic supervisory staff before and a report back afterwards with grading and so on. It's proven to be extraordinarily successful, both in Australia and far beyond. We have students going into Peru doing community development

projects, and others going to Borneo for a justice program. We have students working all over the world.

I think part of the motivation behind our new way of approaching partners and suppliers is that when I arrived, I was concerned that we didn't have well-positioned organisational infrastructure to address how the university might engage with partners and suppliers beyond the traditional commercial transaction.

I recruited Professor David Wilkinson from the University of Queensland to a new portfolio. His portfolio is all about diversifying the ways we relate to partners and suppliers—not just by going to them and saying, "Here's what we can do for you," but by talking to partners, commercial organisations, and professional groups and saying, "Can we have a conversation about how we can add value to each other?"

We're finding that's an enormously enriching experience for the university. Sometimes, organisations will say, "We have certain concerns about this area in our business which you may be able to help us with"—for example, a piece of contract research. Or they might say, "We have interest in developing our own workforce, not only by recruiting new staff that might be your graduates but by providing programs for our existing staff. Is that something that the Macquarie Graduate School of Management or your Faculty of Business and Economics might be able to help with?"

We're in the process of working with organisations in a much more diversified way than we've done before and, I believe, than is traditional for universities to do. This really underpins the whole vision of service and engagement of a university not being an ivory tower set aside as a custodian of knowledge, but being deeply engaged in listening to the needs

of our partners and stakeholders and responding to those in a very dynamic way.

#### Where do you see the university sector and Macquarie University going in coming years?

I think the university sector in Australia is in an interesting time where the turbulence of the higher-education environment around the world is quite profound. There have been a lot of shifts in the appetite of international students to come to Australia to study, and the global financial crisis had an impact on that. I think we see that recovering, probably not to the height it was at before, but certainly we are seeing a turnaround, which is very pleasing. We are diversifying our geographic footprint internationally. We have a new Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International), Professor Jim Lee, from Canada, who is leading our new work in that area.

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For Macquarie University, our aspiration is to really emerge as a truly unique Australian university, one that is distinctively Australian but one that is thoroughly international as well. We have quite deep partnerships offshore. Of all Australian universities, we have the largest joint PhD programs with universities offshore, including China.

I think part of the future of Australian universities, particularly Macquarie, is that we need to be thoroughly anchored in Australia, providing excellence in education for Australian students and international students, while also being very engaged in the wide world. We currently have students on the Macquarie campus enrolled from more than

100 countries, which provides an extraordinary mix of cultural diversity. It really enriches the life of the university.

At the same time, we've had to manage the university's resources wisely. We happen to be in very good shape there. Our systems and approaches towards the financial management of the university have resulted in us approaching a billion dollars a year in turnover. We're not quite there yet, but I predict we'll be well over a billion dollars in annual turnover within a couple of years. In that sense, we are an institution that has a great responsibility for wise stewardship of all the resources we receive, from government to commercial and philanthropic resources. •

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