



For the PUBLIC GOOD

With nine campuses, Charles Sturt University has grown to become Australia's largest regional university and the nation's leading provider of distance and online education.

Images by Frank Colzato

Noted explorer Charles Sturt once wrote that his commitment to exploration was not for personal gain but rather because of "an earnest desire to promote the public good". When Charles Sturt University (CSU) was established in 1989, it adopted a refined version of those writings as its motto, 'For the Public Good', to guide its actions as an educational institution. Twenty-five years on and this ethos still resonates strongly.

CSU provides a learning environment that embraces diversity and nurtures individual growth. President and Vice-Chancellor Professor Andrew Vann says it is a university focused on serving the needs of its communities and its professions, offering opportunities to students, and working with local industries to achieve successful outcomes.

"That was what really attracted me to come here," Andrew explains. "CSU is very much an institution that's devoted to access and creating opportunities for people. One thing I am very proud of is, according to 2013 figures, we actually have the highest number of Indigenous enrolments and Indigenous completions in all of Australia. So we are making a substantial difference to Indigenous higher education. Furthermore, we have the second-highest number of low socioeconomic students in the country."

Andrew has been with CSU since the beginning of 2012. A civil engineer by training, his career direction took a new path when he returned to university to study for a PhD. "I didn't actually intend to stay working in academia, but I kind of got seduced by it," he recalls. "I really enjoyed the teaching and the research aspects

of it and the contribution that universities make to taking society forward and changing people's lives. Ultimately, that was what persuaded me to make a career out of this."

He says academics are trained to be a critical bunch. At its worst, this leads to constant complaints about how dreadful everything is, how awful the systems are, and how incompetent management is. Working as a lecturer, he quickly tired of all the negativity: "I decided I would have a go at trying to fix things up." Andrew saw the leadership roles as an opportunity to solve problems and really make a difference in tertiary education.

When he arrived at CSU, he spent six months going around to each campus and listening to the thoughts of students, staff, and visitors. After he had a good sense of what the university was all >

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about, he worked on redefining the strategy and putting a mission-focused plan in place.

“We produced a narrative, as we called it, for our strategy. One of the things we included in there was actually a phrase from the Wiradjuri, which is our local traditional owner group,” Andrew says. “It’s a phrase which is ‘Yindyamarra winhanga-nha’ and it translates as ‘the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in’. We thought that was a really nice articulation of our public-good mission and a lovely explanation of what a university should be doing—actually trying to instil wisdom in its students, its graduates, and its communities to help the world be a better place.”

While it was an initial challenge to get everyone onto the same mindset, Andrew found that opening up the lines of communication and generating

discussion helped. Several years later and the hard work is paying off for CSU as it continues to build on its foundations and set itself up to thrive in the twenty-first century.

Andrew believes the university has always had a great spirit, which is captured in the narrative: “We have gumption, we have soul, and we collaborate with others.” There is a real sense of community, and each individual is an asset playing a vital role in the successful workings of the organisation.

“Whenever I talk about gumption, which is really an approach to problem-solving and proactivity, the conversation always turns to bathroom cleaners,” Andrew laughs. “But it’s a term I got from Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Pirsig talks about gumption as being ‘at the front of the train of your own awareness’. You are ‘watching to see what’s up the track and meeting it when it



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comes’. So it’s a really positive, proactive sense of actually engaging with what can be a very challenging world. Our strategy has been a mix of prodding people on a personal level and trying to engender conversations within the institution.”

With so many campuses located throughout New South Wales, CSU has had to embrace technology to make communications easier. Andrew is based in Bathurst, New South Wales, while his staff are distributed across each of the different sites. Weekly senior executive meetings are conducted via video conferencing, information is regularly shared electronically, and a web strategy director has been employed to help create a valued brand in the online space. Andrew also dabbles in social media as an active Twitter user.

“It’s critical for us,” Andrew explains. “We are really trying to be cutting edge, especially in terms of the video technology aspect. We have just bought a new solution in the video conferencing space because that’s just so important to us within the internal workings of the organisation, and also to be able to reach students.

“One really interesting thing about CSU is its strength in distance and



online education. Two-thirds of our students are studying externally, and that’s out of nearly 40,000 students. We have been a very strong player in distance education for decades, and while that’s become a very trendy thing in the past few years for all universities, there is a depth of understanding here and a depth of practice which I think positions us very well for the future.”

Furthermore, CSU is using the online sphere to show off its assets and portray itself in the truest and

best light. “I think we don’t always get a good sense of the personality of universities through their websites. We are doing quite a bit of work now to try and make sure that we have an external face which actually represents the true nature of what’s going on in the university. We have fantastic academics and really interesting things, and we are just trying to make sure that sense of intellectual life comes out. That’s one of the things I have really tried to push.

“One of my hobbies is music. I played in folk bands for a while and have hung around a lot of festivals. I also was on the board of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music when I was in Townsville, Queensland. So I have had some exposure to the organisation of arts events, and the way I have put it to the university around the web is that actually we should think of it like a festival.

“When you organise a festival, you have to have an idea of the overall

theme of it, you have to program, you have to be able to pick performers, and you have to be able to put on things that will attract people to come back year after year. That’s the kind of mindset that I have tried to encourage around the web design—to look at how we are going to make it exciting and enticing to make people want to come back and be a part of our community.”

CSU recently celebrated 25 years as a university, although its origins date back to well before then. It began in the mid 1890s as experimental farms in Bathurst and Wagga Wagga before those sites grew and developed to become teachers colleges. In 1989, it was opened as CSU.

The university has had many proud moments, but Andrew believes the most significant achievement has been the human capital which has come out of the organisation. “It’s the fact that >



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sure the research we are doing has relevance and is appreciated by people. Out of all of that, I think it requires a lot of discipline and effort to really try to create a good organisation.”

To help it achieve its future goals and stay on a successful path forward, CSU is committed to continuing its collaboration with partner organisations and suppliers. According to Andrew, this is an important core value that has existed for many years.

“There are obviously many organisations that we work very closely with. Our technology partners are very important to us; we’ve had really good collaborations with our architects and construction firms. We’re a very large organisation, so finance and consultancy are important. And then from an educational point of view, one of the key collaborations we have is with TAFE. About a third of our students have some sort of TAFE or VET qualification before they come into the university. Particularly in rural areas, we try to work really well with TAFE so that we can jointly do a better job for our communities than could be done separately.

“These are thin markets that we are operating in. They are places where many people wouldn’t try to run an educational establishment. It goes back to what we are proud of—the ability to work with other parties to deliver those education services and deliver those successful outcomes to our communities.” ●

turbulent period with government proposals for deregulating student fees. At the moment, I have got to say, it’s not at all clear what’s going to happen in the federal space or where the government is going to want to take things next. One of the things I was very conscious of when I took the role on with CSU was to try and get the mission straightened out so that we knew what we wanted to achieve and not be dragged off that by what the government or markets might do.

“I think tertiary education will continue to become much more competitive. It’s certainly not a protected industry anymore. There is sometimes a view that academia is this kind of feather-bedded place where people just twiddle their thumbs and while away the time. But it’s not like that; it’s a very competitive industry now. We have got to be absolutely attentive to student needs, we have got to be absolutely attentive to educational quality, and we have got to make

about half of the teachers west of the Great Dividing Range in New South Wales are CSU graduates, as are about half of the accountants. We know that about 75 to 80 per cent of our students who are in allied health and come from regional and rural backgrounds go back to work in regional and rural practices. So I think what we are really proudest of is the fact we are sustaining our communities with skilled professionals.”

Andrew says it is difficult to know where the future of higher education is heading in Australia. “It’s quite an uncertain time. We have been through a pretty



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Leon Allen
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Commonwealth Bank

Australian universities have earned a strong global reputation for their quality teaching and research standards and as the birthplaces of ideas and innovation. The University of Queensland’s Gardasil cervical cancer vaccine is a case in point, saving thousands of lives across the globe.

Australia’s tertiary education funding system has been the subject of intense review lately, as the nation debates the best possible funding mix to support a sector that is critical to the country’s economic and social wellbeing.

It is widely recognised that the educational standards of the workforce will be critical to driving national productivity and economic opportunity. Moreover, as a country adjacent to an Asian middle-class income boom, Australia has the opportunity to offer world-class educational services to 62 per cent of the forecast global student pool.

Recognising this need and opportunity, and despite a tight fiscal environment, governments continue to invest in the higher education sector. But the rate of growth of that investment won’t match previous periods.

Domestic and international students will be asked to play an even bigger role in funding the

sector in future. This means our universities and higher education entities will face formidable revenue and funding challenges, as well as energised global competition also looking for a slice of the region’s growth.

In order to position for this future, universities and higher education providers will need to ensure they offer a high-quality educational experience, attractive to more discerning student consumers and in-demand faculty and staff.

Traditionally, they have maintained generally low levels of gearing and leverage in funding replacement of their capital stock, with the majority of the sector’s financing needs over time met by shorter-term bank debt.

In fact, banks—including Commonwealth Bank—have supported Australia’s Group of Eight universities by providing almost two-thirds of their finance needs in the form of bank loans.

A shift towards a demand-driven funding system and an appetite for further reform will require more funding flexibility from the universities of the future.

In the past decade, many universities have begun supplementing bank debt with a number of successful issues on international debt capital markets that are appealing to international

investors and allow universities to access cheaper funding costs.

Universities have also explored alternative funding options. Finance leasing arrangements have helped maintain fleet and equipment, while public-private partnerships have been powerful in executing capital works projects.

This funding innovation trend, combined with a focus on efficiency across the sector, will position universities well to capitalise on future opportunities.

At Commonwealth Bank, we believe Australian universities and higher education providers are in a unique position to be both a key player in domestic economic development, and to benefit from growth in the Asia-Pacific region, with middle-income earners expected to treble over the next two decades and the global student pool increasing to seven million by 2020.

In the end, it is an outstanding student and faculty experience, delivered through flexible funding that will lead universities to ‘high distinction’ in years to come.

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