

Navigating the foreign country of our past to realise a better future

Wednesday, 28 April, 2021

The 2021 Humanitarian Leadership Conference

Virtual conference (online only)

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Thank you.

It is a pleasure to be with you today, and to launch what I am sure will be an absorbing, thought-provoking conference.

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership is a truly joint collaboration between Deakin University and Save the Children Australia, who are proud co-organisers of this event.

Many, if not all of the issues being discussed over the next two days are complex and vexed. There are no simple answers; there are few, if any moral certitudes.

The perspectives you will hear and the conversations you will participate in, are not possible without formats like this that allow time for deeper examination and the free contest of ideas.

During the conference, you will challenge the traditional place and value attached to humanitarian systems, actors and perceptions. You will focus on who the real humanitarians are and thus challenge existing practices and historical understandings.

As overdue as this is, it will not be easy. It will not be easy to balance what we must learn from the past despite its shortcomings with what we must forge anew.

In this context I will reflect on Deakin University and the legacy of Alfred Deakin to illustrate both our own thinking and also to suggest a wider approach.

We must not shy away from these conversations just because they are demanding or uncomfortable. On the contrary, we must engage with people who have the knowledge, we must listen to each other's lived experiences, and we must try to better understand and learn from the past.

I look forward to having these conversations with you.

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."¹

So famously wrote the British novelist L. P. Hartley, the opening line of his 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*.

¹ L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1953, Chapter 1

In that first chapter, his narrator Leo Colston, is in the attic of his childhood home, looking at trinkets from his youth. These long-lost items are bringing up uncomfortable memories...memories he had suppressed.

One in particular evokes unwelcome feelings: a diary he had written about his experiences as a child.

He says of the diary: "I did not want to touch it and told myself that this was because it challenged my memory: I was proud of my memory and disliked having it prompted..."²

The past can be confronting. Or, through the rose-tinted lens of nostalgia, it can be comforting – even a motivating force for re-creating a lost world. We have all seen that effect too...to make something 'great' again...

Over the last few decades, we have had to confront some untold truths about our past, especially things that took place under the cover of the once-immutable institutions that governed our society.

More recently, there has been another series of flashpoints, including the Black Lives Matter protests and the #MeToo movement; and in Australia specifically, Royal Commissions that have uncovered the truth across a range of serious social issues and failings; even within the humanitarian sector, with sexual abuse and harassment by aid workers of vulnerable community members.

Our collective past is coming under greater and greater scrutiny.

These moments prompt us to pause and re-examine the people and institutions we have relied on or taken for granted. We also start to question those we venerate, through our organisations, our statues and monuments, the awarding of honours...right down to the language we use and the inherent bias it betrays.

...we are having to look at the framework behind the walls, and the foundations beneath the floor...

This is an uncomfortable process, often painful. To many, it feels like an upheaval, a tearing down of the structures that support our society, however flawed they might be. But to many others, it feels long overdue; a process of truth-telling and of setting things right.

As we learn new perspectives of our history, a strong temptation is to judge the past solely on our present values. One of the greatest challenges is being sympathetic to the context of the time, to understand that just like today, issues were complex and contextual.

In particular, it is very difficult to neatly separate the social and political structures of the past, from the people who lived among them, the challenges they faced, the privileges they enjoyed, the views they held and the reasoning that underpinned them.

Let me reflect on Australia's two very different origin stories as an entry point to the discussions that will take place during this conference.

These two stories converged in the late 18th century, and even now, 233 years later, our country is still trying to reconcile what came of this – the aftermath of two cultures colliding.

The healing process of Reconciliation continues today, and in some years we make better progress than in others. There is no simple solution – compassion takes time to take effect.

Reconciliation is not about throwing away one part of our history – both origin stories have their place. It should be about acknowledging, reflecting, and moving forward together – a genuine reconciliation, from the Latin, *conciliare*, to bring together.

The Yolngu word, *makarrata*, also describes the process of conflict resolution, peacemaking and justice, and is used in the profound and moving Uluru Statement from the Heart. It reads: "*Makarrata* is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle.*"³

² Hartley, *ibid.*, Chapter 1

³ *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, 2017, accessed at <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement>

What a truly poetic meaning that expresses the initial pain, and the shared empathy and forgiveness that needs to follow.

At Deakin, we have recently reaffirmed our commitment to the Indigenous people of this country.

In our new ten-year strategic plan, *Deakin 2030: Ideas to Impact*, we have committed to Reconciliation and Treaty; to advance the educational aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and to help move Indigenous knowledges into the mainstream of Australian life. All our endeavours aim to reflect on Australia's full history and seek to build an inclusive future.⁴

However, just like many other institutions, just as in the humanitarian sector, we must also acknowledge our past if we are to grow and move forward together.

Universities form a significant part of the social structure of our past and present, and as places of knowledge and learning, have played – and continue to play – an influential role in defining the prominent thinking of the day.

Given this, what is the role of universities in humanitarian leadership now? And in order to be seen as leaders, how do we address the challenges of our own histories – their inconsistencies and hypocrisies?

As a modern, globally connected university, we at Deakin see our fundamental role as delivering outcomes that benefit society – locally, nationally and globally. All our efforts across the University aim to achieve, or to support this endeavour. We work with others, we collaborate and we seek strong partnerships that will endure.

But historically, universities have not always been community-facing and open to society-at-large. In fact, they came under regular criticism for being 'cloistered' institutions, shut off from the world.

The first universities were created in Europe by Christian monks, with The University of Bologna founded in 1088.

Since that time, reflecting wider shifts in political and economic, and intellectual realities, universities across the globe have become secular – Australia's universities were of this mould.

In Australia in 1850 the University of Sydney was established, adopting the principle of institutional autonomy, offering entry without religious qualification. "[This]...would become the model for all later Australian higher education – an autonomous, professional, comprehensive, secular, public and commuter university".⁵

As each new Australian university was established, their links to the predominant Commonwealth history and culture remained strong. We can still see this clearly in the names of many formed in the second half of the 20th century: Monash University established in 1958, La Trobe in 1964, Curtin and Flinders in 1966, and James Cook University in 1970.

And yes, Deakin University – formed in 1974, named after Alfred Deakin, Australia's second Prime Minister and one of the primary architects of Federation.

From these foundations, from these Anglo-centric cultural origins, how can we create a better and stronger blend of worldviews and cultural knowledge? And what is in a name? Does a name and its connotations define an institution?

At the request of senior Indigenous leaders and members of the Deakin families, we have begun the conversation about the origins and symbolism of our University's name. As the saying goes: "Organisations evolve in the direction of the questions they ask". We are very grateful that we are able to ask these important questions and discuss them respectfully.

Alfred Deakin was a complex character, truly a 'man of many parts'.

⁴ *Deakin 2030: Ideas to Impact*; accessed at <https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/strategic-direction>

⁵ G. Davis, *The Australian Idea of a University*, 2001, Meanjin

He was a product of his time, but also projected himself into the future: he was a teetotaller and didn't smoke, and in his youth was a strict vegetarian.⁶ He was drawn to spiritualism and mysticism, but also based much of his worldview on Christianity.

He was politically astute – especially in the art of compromise; but also plagued by self-doubt throughout his career⁷, despite his overt confidence and his impressive skills in oratory.

Like his persona, his record of political achievements is multi-faceted, some elements almost contradictory – or at least, not stereotypical for a conservative politician.

Through advocacy and the introduction of legislation, he championed workers' rights and conditions in factories and pioneered better irrigation practices to improve agriculture and stimulate economic growth.

While a product of the British colonies and loyal to the Empire, he was an Australian foremost and his passion was the movement for Federation.

Without doubt, there are other activities and views he espoused in the political arena that, especially in today's context, are problematic, and troubling. In particular, his views on nationalism, White Australia and race relations more broadly.

However, we must be careful to avoid seeing these aspects in isolation, and to judge accordingly. As Alfred Deakin himself said: "We are what others have made us...individuality is a cautious compound of other lives."⁸

And as John La Nauze observed of Deakin in his biography: "Of all men yet concerned in Australian politics, he is the last who should rest, neatly labelled, in an historical pigeonhole."⁹

Importantly, we must acknowledge that there is an Alfred Deakin legacy, and a Deakin University legacy. The two, while linked, have their own identities, their own achievements, and the University continues to forge its own reputation.

The best legacy for Alfred Deakin is Deakin University: bringing Indigenous and colonial history together to forge something uniquely Australian, bringing together expertise in a distinctive cultural setting and finding ways to unite people from different cultures and experiences. The fusion of many cultures and ideas is stronger than any one on its own.

Those eight portables on the edge of campus in 1986 that became the Institute of Koorie Education and today NIKERI, and the more than 1,000 Indigenous students from communities across the nation who have graduated since, are the legacy of Deakin University.

There is no one right approach or response to Reconciliation. It is a coming together of cultures over time – acknowledgement of the past comes first, then we work to create a harmony of voices and ethos, and a shared vision for the future.

Yes, language is powerful, and we choose to name things for the symbolism and evocation. But as we find out more about our past, we must acknowledge both the good and the bad, and rather than discard all of one culture's language and memory, we must work even harder to achieve a better blend of Indigenous and other names and symbols.

While our universities are steeped in our European history, what we haven't got is the equivalent from Indigenous history. We took the British model, and not known or acknowledged at the time was the more than 60,000 years of rich culture that surrounded us.

⁶ J. Brett, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin*, 2017, p.64

⁷ R. Norris, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 8, 1981, accessed at: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/deakin-alfred-5927>

⁸ Brett, *ibid.* p.152

⁹ J.A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: a biography*, 1965, p.659

To quote Professor Grace Karskens, from the University of NSW describing Sydney, but applicable across the country: “These are ‘storied lands’, replete with meanings so dense, so rich, so poignant, so ancient, so modern; yet so often invisible.”¹⁰

It is our duty to continue to uncover these stories, to learn from them, and reconcile – *makarrata*.

In our own strategic plan, through our own commitments, we have acknowledged this as a central theme: it is part of our University, Deakin’s, commitment to our shared future.

The road extending behind and ahead of us, is certainly not clear of obstacles and debris, nor is it free of traps and snares – some of our own making.

We must take the best of the past with us, and acknowledge and learn from the worst.

And what about the rest of that foreign country of the past, that we are yet to discover and to judge?

We know that for many Indigenous people, the present, *not* the past, is a foreign country; so, we certainly have a long way to go.

Stan Grant, a Wiradjuri man, and one of our country’s great minds, said: “Whenever our history looms over the present, obscuring progress, the past frames the present and denies the future”.¹¹

We must not let our past cast such a shadow over our future – we must have these important conversations. We must continue to learn, and continue to travel forward together.

To borrow the thoughts of another British author, although in this case one like me, who went out to the so-called ‘colonies’ and became an Australian, Alex Miller:

“The story of our journey is always a fiction; it is always dealing with the past on the present’s terms. We tell the story in order to free ourselves from the past so that we can move on, not in order to recover the past, which is merely nostalgia...Travelling, moving on, seeking the future, is what we do.”¹²

Thank you.

¹⁰ G. Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, 2009

¹¹ S. Grant, *My Grandfather’s Equality – Confronting the Cosmopolitan Frontier*, 2018, Griffith Review

¹² A. Miller, *The Simplest Words*, 2016, p.15