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**Conference Theme: Academic Freedom and Responsibility Towards Society: Who Decides What Science We Do?**

Address by APRU Secretary General:

**Allocating Resources in The Race for Scientific Dominance: Research Funding and Academic Freedom**

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The topic of this Forum, ‘Academic Freedom and Responsibility Towards Society: Who Decides What Science We Do?’, is a question for my organization in two respects. First, how can research universities contribute to their societies if individual scholars have their intellectual autonomy circumscribed or are under personal threat? This issue is taken up already by such excellent organisations as *Scholars at Risk* and needs to be acknowledged and addressed more directly by institutions themselves.

Secondly, the academic freedom to address issues of the common good across international borders is fundamental to the well-being of our societies. I am here as the representative of a network of universities and I see potential for widening the scope of collaborations and extending the arena for cooperation on addressing the global common good as a key aspect of developing relationships of trust across national borders and preventing their obstruction.

APRU is compelled to view the many and increasing constraints on academic freedom and more intrusive national imperatives governing research funding, in this larger international context. We encounter the complex, geopolitical dynamic of both competition and collaboration by nations in the drive for technological leadership for national security and economic growth.

National funding regimes and the limits imposed or incentives provided by governments of various kinds – from democratic polities under threat of authoritarian white nationalism (e.g. US, Australia) to authoritarian, one-party states with their own ethnic essentialism (e.g. China and Singapore) – need to be viewed in their geopolitical context.

The Asia-Pacific or APEC region has an estimated 40 percent of the world’s population, 60 percent of global GDP and 47 percent of global trade. It also includes most major ‘research powers’: the US, Canada, China, Japan, Korea, Australasia and Russia but not the EU. National research funding therefore occurs within the complex, geopolitical dynamic of both competition and collaboration in the drive for technological leadership for national security and economic growth. The US-China relationship is not only the most obvious example in the Asia-Pacific region but also is strategically important for the whole region.

There also appears to be an increasing contradiction between research for the global common good (e.g. cross-border challenges of global health, sustaining the ecosystem, climate change, addressing inequality…) and research for national economic and political objectives. This exacerbates the gap between the social and geographic locations of research on solving global crises and where disasters and disease burdens, for example, have greatest impact.

Paradoxically, this geopolitical environment increases the potential of networks for creating neutral international platforms for collaboration on global challenges, unofficial platforms that act as super-connectors, amplifying the impact of research on policy development and technical solutions at the international level.

The opportunity to do this is also attested to by the evidence that global science is being shaped by a remarkable expansion over the last 30 years of international scientific collaboration through a system of open networks not directly subject to national governance or evaluation regimes. These networks have formed in response to the complexity of global challenges and include countries where research funding is very constrained or where civil rights, including academic freedom, are under attack (e.g. China and the US) or being eroded (e.g. Hong Kong).

While acknowledging negative developments from the increasing imposition of political or commercial imperatives on research funding in many jurisdictions, the opportunities of leveraging the more democratic spaces offered by these platforms and common cross-border challenges have yet to be taken up at any scale.

This proposition of this address is that a focus on the network effects of neutral international platforms and the global common good may provide the research funding community a way to select themes and topics and to maximize academic freedom and research impact even in the midst of increasing constraints.

Let me expand on these points.

APRU is a network of 50 leading research universities from 17 APEC economies around the Pacific including the Americas, East and Southeast Asia and Australasia.

We were established by the presidents of Caltech, Berkeley, UCLA and USC in 1997 when they saw the increasing economic integration of the Asia-Pacific region and the potential for collaboration on scientific research and on advising government and business in the region.

We have therefore developed programs to leverage the research and education capabilities of the network members into the international public policy process in common challenges such as:

* Asia-Pacific Women in Leadership
* Population Aging
* Global Health
* Digital Economy and Artificial Intelligence
* Multi-Hazards and disaster risk reduction
* The Pacific Ocean
* Sustainable Cities and Landscapes

Essential to the success of a network strategy is partnership with other sectors: multilateral organisations, the private sector, foundations and governments, partnerships where the collective efforts of our members can add unique value. We build coalitions with cities, communities and NGOs. These collaborations are attractive to private funders.

In describing our context, it is often observed that the geopolitics of higher education and research has shifted towards the Asia-Pacific region. Strong research universities are emerging along with the attendant issues of maintaining academic autonomy within very different systems.

In this wide diversity of contexts, all universities in the Asia-Pacific region nevertheless have to encounter the same three landscapes:

**The first landscape is planetary.** The recent IPCC report again draws attention to the effects of climate change and the sustainability of organized human life.

The response to climate change brings us face to face with the breakdown of institutions of fairness and participation nationally and internationally just at the point we need them most.

All our members have an interest in solving these challenges and research universities are uniquely placed to play an important role.

**The second landscape is the US-China relationship** which, as I have noted, is critical to the Asia-Pacific region. Until recently this was a strong, positive relationship beneficial to both sides with the usual minor tensions. Now, the trade war, sabre-rattling on both sides, various forms of obstruction from immigration clamp-downs to blocks in data-sharing and communications, and pressure on universities in both countries to play a political role and limit academic autonomy – these are making collaboration for problem-solving more and more difficult.

**The third landscape is really a seascape.** The Pacific Ocean and the Ring of Fire are our members’ common inheritance, an area almost half the Earth’s surface. Its future is our future. The sustainability of our societies is directly related to the sustainability of the Pacific Ocean. Our research-related themes often derive from the shared geophysical realities of the region and, in turn, drive our partnerships with multilateral, government and private sector organisations embedded in the region.

**Network Strategy**

We are finding that a network strategy has a new salience in the midst of these landscapes of rapid change, turbulence and uncertainty.

A network with enormous reach and depth of knowledge is a huge resource especially as other forms of cooperation attenuate or disappear. While many bilateral relations are under strain, we remain a portal or connector that can be used to mobilize resources of knowledge and innovation to solve real problems and to advance understanding of our societies.

I remain optimistic because I know the positive value of what researchers do, their ability to bring many benefits to society and to solving so many critical challenges. I know it is possible to build lasting relationships of trust and cooperation across borders of nation, culture, discipline, gender, language… even in times of tension and conflict.

At the same time, we need to be realistic that the sense of equilibrium or progress of past decades is not coming back. New configurations of power require us to construct new ways to build trust and to advance cooperation. There is much that is positive about the tools at our disposal as well as a new generation which is conscious of its responsibilities to secure the future of the planet.

Underlying our success as a network, are three central factors:

1. a commitment to multilateralism in the face of economic nationalism,
2. the provision of international platforms which leverage network effects through multi-stakeholder partnerships,
3. the assertion of ethical leadership through identifying and standing for the global common good.

We also appreciate more and more the network effects that arise from our flexible and de-centralized character:

* We are a little more emancipated from institutional interests and national policy contexts.
* We are able to embrace new ideas and trends, establish new partnerships and processes and to explore.
* Our members are embedded in a wide diversity of contexts and deep knowledge of this diversity, drawn together by a cross-disciplinary, cross-border network platform, is exactly what is required by the complex nature of the challenges we face and by the polarised international situation.

This is why we are very interested to note a recent study which suggests that the massive expansion in international scientific collaboration over the last 30 years has produced a system of open networks that does not mirror geopolitical power. It is a system that is not directly subject to national governance regimes. These networks have apparently emerged partly in response to the complexity of global issues.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Therefore, in addressing the question of funders allocating resources in the midst of a race for scientific dominance and technological leadership, at least part of the task of maintaining and advancing academic freedom is creating the conditions for collaboration across borders. Our task must be:

* to aggregate at scale at the international level the social power of knowledge and innovation through neutral platforms
* to speak to the kind of world we want to create, the kind of values we aspire to uphold in our societies and in the international community,
* and to securing the future through commitment to the global common good.

I conclude by referring to a report we recently released on *Transformative Solutions to Asia-Pacific Challenges*.[[2]](#footnote-2) A major theme of the case studies and analysis in this report is the need for models of collaboration between STEM disciplines and the social sciences and humanities in comprehending, framing and finding solutions to global challenges. The report gives many examples of current initiatives and what we can learn from them. We show that a network amplifies their impact and thereby attests to the promise of a focus on the common good.

1. Caroline S. Wagner, Han Woo Park, Loet Leydesdorf, (2015) ‘The Continuing Growth of Global Cooperation Networks in Research: A Conundrum for National Governments’, PLoS ONE (10)7:e0131816. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *https://apru.org/images/2018ImpactReport/2018ImpactRep-web.pdf* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)