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Universities Leading Social Development

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Leading the Asia-Pacific Region: Contributing to the Common Good

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Introduction: A World Out of Balance

All of us in the world of higher education are familiar with the continuous and increasing pressure on universities to prove their performance according to external measures such as those defining the term 'world-class'. The compulsion to do more with declining public funding per student produces a laser-like focus on internal administration.

At the same time, universities must demonstrate their commitment to the public good by being externally engaged with solving global issues. As research institutions we must contribute to the critical understanding of society and culture, and to scientific and technological solutions.

This tension may sound like business as usual. Nothing new here. Get on with the job.

But, today, we have to face the reality that what may have been healthy imperatives for improvement are now being played out in radically new circumstances. We are in a world which is out of balance. There is no equilibrium.

Every year that passes places humanity in increasing peril. We face abnormal challenges in abnormal times.

There is already blow back on our ecosystems and on our political and social institutions - universities, governments, businesses, local communities.

We know that we are in unprecedented crisis. Our scientists have told us that we have crossed many thresholds of irreversible climate change and, in the unlikely the event that we can limit the rise in global temperature to under two degrees by the end of this century, the effects will still be catastrophic. Furthermore, this is not a future event. We are suffering the early effects right now.

The crisis has been summarized recently as follows:

> "…more than half the carbon exhaled into the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels has been emitted in just the past three decades."

This means we have done as much damage knowingly to the fate of the planet and its ability to sustain human life and civilization as we ever managed in ignorance.[1]

> "…there is already, right now, fully a third more carbon in the atmosphere than at any point in the last 800,000 years – perhaps as long as 15 million years. There were no humans then. The oceans were more than 100 feet higher."[2]

Last week we learned from the analysis of the Climate Accountability Institute in the US that just 20 fossil fuel companies can be linked to more than one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions in the modern era. And these companies knew about their environmental impact from the late 1950's, if not before.[3] We know who they are and that they continue to try to blame the consumer rather than themselves and to pretend they are taking significant green initiatives.

In brief, as far as the human species is concerned, we are now living on an alien planet; we exist in an environment where humans have never lived before. We have achieved this appalling result in the space of a single human life.

For a long time we have struggled with issues of economic growth, inequality, access to resources including water and food, access to new technologies, political rights, health care, environmental protection, human security, managing recovery from extreme events, and so on.

Today, these issues are infused with the panic of survival. Survival of countries, of corporations, of elites, of cultures, of institutions, of species.

Elites are already selecting the winners and losers of climate change – which refugees will be accepted, whose land disappears under the sea without help, who gets life-saving drugs, billionaires are building survival houses in other people's countries while millions face losing their homes and livelihoods in extreme events, national budgets are spent on weapons or subsidizing fossil fuels rather than combatting climate change.

In short, we have entered **the politics of the selective survival of the human species**.

Universities acting together can make a significant difference

The challenges seem overwhelming.

Yet many of the solutions are now within reach. We know what to do.

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[1] p.4, David Wallace-Wells. *The Uninhabitable Earth-A Story of the Future*, (London: Allen Lane) 2019.
[2] p.4, David Wallace-Wells.
[3] Matthew Taylor and Jonathan Watts, 'Revealed: the 20 firms behind a third of all carbon emissions' *The Guardian* October 9, 2019.

We have probably passed the tipping point when the green economy is more efficient and profitable than the carbon economy.

We can realistically have the ambition not just to adapt or mitigate but actually to reverse climate change.

This ambition must be underpinned by generating political will and by achieving scale in the many solutions that are already known or being developed.

As research universities, we can make a significant difference especially if we act together across boundaries of nation, culture, discipline, gender, socio-economic status, and our location in the biosphere.

I want to use the example of APRU. Not because we are exceptional but because we have made a start. Also because we have a unique reach through a network of 51 universities from 18 economies around the Pacific with more than two million students and around 200,000 faculty. And we have the ambition to do much more and to have real impact.

Many of you are our members and you already do a lot to contribute to climate solutions.

The challenge now is to work collectively, to act together, to combine our social influence, to educate the current generation which is the last generation that has a chance to fix the planet. Our responsibility is therefore both to **generate political will** and to **implement the technical solutions at scale**. These imperatives must permeate all we do.

As the difficulties of international cooperation increase, political systems prove too slow or inadequate and planetary crises intensify, we are finding that APRU also becomes more important as a cross-border, trans-Pacific platform for collaboration.

Strategic Priorities
In this context, our Strategic Plan sets out our priorities as:

1. Building global impact
2. Increasing APRU's value to members
3. Creating high-value partnerships
4. Generating the resources to achieve these priorities.

As we implement these priorities, we seek to align our activities to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and to measure impact.

Programs
Our members can be proud about how far we have come. Let me outline some of our collaborative work under four headings.

Under ***Shaping Higher Education in the Asia Pacific*** we include meetings of academic leaders and other multilateral activities whereby APRU brings policy insights to the global higher education community.

Our theme of ***Creating Global Student Leaders*** includes the conferences, competitions, and summer schools which engage students in key research and policy topics related to regional realities including AI and social impact, leadership for social good, sustainable trade, mental health and global health ethics, disaster recovery, urbanization and sustainability.

In terms of our priority on the SDGs and climate change, we look forward to the launch next year of the MOOC 'Bending the Curve' by the UC system. I encourage your universities to take up this educational opportunity to have thousands of students around the region study the ways of keeping the Earth's temperature below two degrees so that they will be equipped to act in their own situations. Or, if alignment with this particular initiative is difficult, then we would be pleased to work with you on another initiative based in China. After all, APRU is now based in China and we should be doing much more together.

Under ***Asia-Pacific Challenges*** we have a long list of achievements in key areas of focus, all related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Most are led by core groups of faculty members from our members, and four have faculty directors located in member universities[: Keio, Oregon, Tohoku and USC.]

These program areas are:
- Asia-Pacific Women in Leadership
- Digital Economy
- Global Health Multi-hazards
- The Pacific Ocean
- Population Aging
- Sustainable Cities and Landscapes

We have also achieved significant results with an intensive program of research, consultation and policy development on **esports** with eleven founding members. We will soon partner with our three Hong Kong members on the **Asia-Pacific Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystems** in the Greater Bay Area to be held at the Science Park in Hong Kong, SAR, December 2 to 5.

Finally, we have a focus on ***International Public Policy*** and significant collaborations and engagements with the UN, APEC, ADB and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council. Most recently this cooperation has produced the *AI for Social Good* program with Google and UN ESCAP, and the **APEC University Leaders' Forum** in Santiago, Chile, on November 14, in partnership with The University of Chile and APEC. We are very pleased that we will have a strong representation of leaders from your universities at this important event.

In terms of new initiatives, I wish to note:

- Sustainable Waste Management, led by Korea University

- The Mayors' Academy for Sustainable Urban Development, led by The University of Oregon and UN ESCAP
- HR Directors Network, led by the National University of Singapore
- Digital Skills Development with APEC, led by The University of the Philippines
- Indigenous Studies Network, led by The University of Melbourne
- Symposium on Haruki Murakami in International Literature, led by Waseda University

This information on our work is available to you in our *Annual Report 2019* which is online at *apru.org*.

The Future: New Thinking

Declaration of Climate Emergency

You will have noticed the recent UN report on the state of the oceans and the profound risk to coastal cities and food supplies not to mention the entire ecosystem. You will also have witnessed speeches at the UN on climate change, the global school strike led by Greta Thunberg, the emergence of the Extinction Rebellion and many other initiatives calling attention to the need to act and act now.

The researchers, professors and students, who comprise our Sustainable Cities and Landscapes Program, have produced a Declaration of Climate Emergency which identifies four key goals in acting on the climate emergency and which they will take to the COP25 UN Conference on Climate Change in Santiago in December:

- Protect the ecological foundations of life
- Ensure the rights of future generations
- Commit to climate justice for the most vulnerable communities
- Act on solutions for cities embedded in specific landscapes

This is another example of how universities have a key role in leading social policy development at the international level and across a wide range of critical issues, none more critical than climate change, economic justice and political participation.

New Thinking Beyond the SDGs

Another example of how universities can offer leadership in social development is through bringing the critical intellectual resources of not only the physical sciences but also the social sciences to bear on the next steps in dealing with climate change.

The Sustainable Development Goals are important ignition points for global cooperation but they are just the beginning. As we mobilise around them we also need to revise them, removing some of their embedded contradictions such the old model of economic growth that they imply, the way inequality could be sidelined, the way drivers of poverty like financial speculation, tax evasion and the lack of political participation are ignored – or even the mis-measurement of poverty.

This new thinking will give us the grounds on which to engage with a new generation which increasingly does not accept the *status quo*. Sensing the existential threat that they will face in their own lives, this generation will not be satisfied with what they see as elite strategies which fail to get to the core of the crises which confront the planet.

Conclusion

The potential for universities to work together and with other sectors to build an active international community of interest makes me very optimistic that we can make a difference.

We have stewardship of the education of future generations who will have the political will to act. Our institutions are at the forefront of understanding society as well as leading beneficial technological discovery. We must work together to ensure solutions are implemented in partnership with citizens and with their informed consent.

We must exercise leadership in social development because we have a great deal to contribute to the well-being of our societies and finding solutions to the many challenges confronting us. Let us demonstrate, by the commitments we make that we have the determination and imagination the task requires.