

The 'Melbourne Agenda' encapsulates the vision, goals and strategies that guide the University of Melbourne. It aims to make the University of Melbourne one of the finest universities in the world.

The 'Melbourne Agenda'



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE



The Challenge

Realising the vision of Melbourne as one of the finest universities in the world will be a long and difficult task. The 'Melbourne Agenda' recognises the importance of the following formidable challenges.

Confronting complacency

Melbourne is a proud institution, and a call for major quality improvement can irritate those who recognise, rightly, that Melbourne has long been an outstanding university.

Yet on any commonly adduced international benchmark, Melbourne is not among the world's top 50 universities, and probably not among the top 75. It has quality researchers, but few nodes of research activity able to build the 'critical mass' research teams necessary to survive the loss of a few key individuals. It produces world-class postgraduate researchers, but struggles to find fitting research employment for them in Australia. The best of its undergraduates are superb by any standards, but the academic departments that produce them are complaining, rightly, of intensifying workload pressures and pessimistic about the maintenance of academic standards in the future. Melbourne's capacity to invest in world class research and teaching infrastructure cannot at present match that of the top 100 universities in the United States, and lags well behind that of the best East Asian and European universities.

Challenging resignation

Critics of the 'Melbourne Agenda' sometimes dismiss as unrealistic the idea of Melbourne, Australia, as home to one of the finest universities in the world. Academic colleagues, politicians, Government higher education bureaucrats or opinion writers may still be heard arguing – as if it does not matter – that Australian universities cannot reasonably aspire to matching even the top 50 United States institutions, or the National University of Singapore, or the best universities in Japan and (increasingly) China, or the outstanding universities of Europe.

Such manifestations of the traditional Australian 'cultural cringe' are extraordinarily damaging, not least because they ignore the forces of globalisation that are rapidly eroding Australia's relative isolation.

The stark truth is that if such resignation persists, in a global knowledge economy with an increasingly internationalised higher education marketplace, the consequences will be not merely mediocre universities in Australia, but a mediocre, increasingly uncompetitive Australia.

Mobilising the University

For the 'Melbourne Agenda' to be implemented, the university community must be empowered by the vision, values, goals and strategies that the Agenda embraces.

There is widespread agreement within the University community about the problems Melbourne currently faces, but considerable scepticism about particular aspects of the 'Melbourne Agenda', and some disagreement with various of its strategies.

Like any other organisation, an academic community is disempowered by pessimism and negativism and empowered by a sense of common purpose.

Mobilising the collegial community of a university is an iterative process. It demands a sense of common purpose at the governance level of the institution. It depends on persuading key opinion leaders in the institution that change is necessary. It requires significant support for key strategies. It builds on success, and is strengthened by a sense of progress. It is endangered by failure, or perceived failure, and by sustained public criticism.

Communicating the vision

Managing the threat of complacency, avoiding the danger of becoming resigned to mediocrity, and meeting the challenge of mobilising the university around the 'Melbourne Agenda', places a premium on, among other things, effective communication.

The fundamental challenge in implementing the 'Melbourne Agenda' is the challenge of internal and external communication, coupled with a willingness to listen to critics as well as advocates, and to combine tenacious commitment to the vision with the flexibility to reappraise strategies and targets in light of experience and in face of significant concerns among colleagues.

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Professor Alan Gilbert, second from left, holds the 2001-2002 University of the Year trophy with, from left, Professor Alec Broers, Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University and a member of the University of Melbourne Council, the Minister for Education, Dr David Kemp, and Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sally Walker. The University of the Year Award was for the Australian University with the highest International Standing.





Strengthening the resource base

International benchmark studies indicate that the University of Melbourne, among the best-endowed of Australian universities, has at its disposal only a quarter to a third of the annual operating resources which the best institutions in North America, Europe and East Asia secure annually to undertake comparable research and teaching responsibilities.

Resources alone cannot guarantee higher education excellence. The commitment, values, professionalism and performance of scholars, teachers and researchers are vitiated and finally destroyed by degraded infrastructure, uncompetitive salaries and the workload pressures arising inevitably from the rationing of scarce resources.

While resource strategies are not ends in themselves, the 'Melbourne Agenda' must therefore be concerned with the challenge of strengthening Melbourne's resource base.

Influencing public policy

To keep a seat at the table of first world scientific, technological and intellectual discourse, Australia needs at least one university (and preferably several) to be genuinely competitive at the highest international level. Yet Australia's current public policy and regulatory framework neither encourages nor facilitates the efforts of Australia's leading universities to compete effectively at the highest international level.

Current higher education policies tend to impose systemic institutional conformity on the national higher education system, to promote high levels of dependence on public funding and regulation, and to provide uncompetitive levels of university funding. Activities designed to produce major new revenue streams meet significant regulatory and policy constraints.

In the absence of either further de-regulation or massive increases in public funding, implementing the 'Melbourne Agenda' will remain a major challenge.

The appointment of Nobel Laureate Professor Peter Doherty, pictured above with Postgraduate students during a leadership forum, reinforces the international reputation of the University.



The Vision

As one of the finest universities in the world, the University of Melbourne will be:

A research led institution

where an uncompromising respect for knowledge drives both a scholarly commitment to preserve, synthesise, apply and disseminate existing knowledge, and a research commitment to discovering new knowledge;

A learning institution

where scholars and researchers working at the cutting edge of knowledge are also teachers, helping successive generations of students learn to respect the disciplined pursuit of knowledge through rational inquiry; to appreciate the best that is known and thought in the world; to develop cognitive skills, intellectual honesty, humane values and professional expertise of the highest order; and, in some cases, to themselves become researchers;

A liberal institution

where truth may be pursued without fear or favour; where rational inquiry is unfettered; where unconventional, unpopular critiques of conventional values and paradigms may be explored; and where academic freedom is protected;

An independent institution

in which a self-regulating collegial community is judged finally by its peers in the 'invisible academy' of international scholarship, and by the value it adds to the international reputation of Australian science, technology, innovation, social science, humanities and cultural life generally;

An international university

recognised and embraced as a kindred institution by leading universities around the world, and able to attract world class researchers, scholars and students to Melbourne; and

A Melbourne institution

committed to the people of Melbourne and Victoria, and to enriching the social, cultural, intellectual, economic and civic life of all Australians.



Alan D. Gilbert
Vice-Chancellor
and Principal

The Agenda:

- 1** To establish Melbourne's reputation as an international research university, especially by identifying and supporting fields of research in which it is possible for the University to sustain research activity and output of genuinely international significance, and by consistently valuing, rewarding and assisting outstanding researchers and research teams;
- 2** To strengthen the University as an academic institution in which scholars, teachers and researchers have workloads consistent with international scholarly norms, are rewarded on an internationally competitive basis and provided with world-class teaching and research infrastructure;
- 3** To enhance the amenity of Melbourne as an outstanding campus-based university enriched by access to the most advanced on-line educational technologies, pedagogies and learning environments;
- 4** To promote the systematic internationalisation of the University through:
 - Enduring partnerships and effective networks involving kindred universities around the world;
 - International cooperation and collaboration in research, teaching and scholarship;
 - Engagement in global e-education and related international higher education enterprises;
 - Commitment to international higher education quality assurance and benchmarking; and
 - The development of international student constituencies and alumni networks associated with the University of Melbourne; and
- 5** By building on and extending the University's existing resource base, and by pioneering new ways of financing research, teaching and scholarship, to double by 2020 the unit of resource per student available to the University of Melbourne.