

Alumni Friends of UQ AGM Address

President Dr Cathi Lawrence, Office Bearers, Members of the Alumni Friends of UQ, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Your AGM this morning marked the conclusion of a year of celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the Alumni Friends. The Jubilee has been recognised with an extraordinarily active programme, including a function hosted by the Senate in the Alumni Court, a reception hosted by the Governor in Government House, a Gala Luncheon with David Malouf and a Jubilee Concert presented by the School of Music. It has been a wonderful celebration that has acknowledged a wonderful contribution by the Alumni Friends throughout the period of its life.

I congratulate your President, Dr Cathi Lawrence, the Executive Committee, the Celebrations Committee and all the other contributors who have brought it about.

I suspect that by now you may have heard one too many speeches on the topic of Jubilee Celebrations, and the last thing that you want is another. But if you will indulge me, I would like to muse a little on the subject of the recognition of significant anniversaries, particularly in the context of the Centenary of UQ, celebrated in 2009 and 2010 at a time when I was privileged to be Chancellor.

A significant anniversary is firstly an opportunity to dwell on the achievements of the past. In the case of the Friends, its contribution has extended across the breadth of the activities of the University. A dollar amount approaching nine million is considerable, but the flow on effect of that contribution has been profound, with an impact that has far exceeded a simple monetary value.

A better measure is to consider, by way of example, the difference that the Friends' contribution has made to the lives of the students

who have received scholarships or awards, to the futures of the budding classicists who have been inspired by the RD Milns Antiquities Museum, or even to the well-being of the troubled souls who have been calmed by the gardens in the Alumni Court.

There are two areas of contribution by the Friends that have, over the years, particularly resonated with me.

The construction of the Mayne Hall in the early 70's was a transformative event in the life of the University. The acquisition of a Hall that provided an on-campus facility for graduation ceremonies and concerts was in itself significant. But what was more significant was that the ambitious project, involving such a stunning architectural creation, had been undertaken and successfully completed, and this conveyed to the broader UQ community a sense of achievement and confidence that helped to propel the University to a higher level. It was one of Sir Zelman Cowen's proudest achievements.

The prospect of a great hall on the Campus had been talked about and petitioned for over ten years. The cost estimates were in the order of \$1 million, but the funds available to the University were in the order of \$600,000. The Vice Chancellor was confident, as vice-chancellors tend to be, that a way would be found. As events transpired, the design of the appointed architect, Robin Gibson, was within the financial envelope. That, however, did not cover the cost of the furnishing and equipping of the building. Myer and BP both contributed substantial sums but, as Professor Malcolm Thomis has recorded in his history of the University, "it was the Alumni Association which took on a massive responsibility for this project and later donated a further \$20,000 towards the cost of the organ".

Of course, today the Hall is the James and Mary Emelia Mayne Centre, housing the impressive UQ Art Museum with its Alumni Friends room. Driven by Professor John Hay, the conversion from the

Hall to the Museum recognised the changing priorities of the University, and the fact that the Hall had ceased to be of a size adequate for its original purpose for graduation ceremonies. It was undertaken sensitively to the original design, and the completed project has been widely acclaimed. Notwithstanding, it is said that Sir Zelman never forgave Professor Hay for changing his original concept, and I confess that some of us still regret its demise as an on-campus concert hall.

But the organ lives on. The conversion has actually improved the acoustics of the building, and the sound of the organ floating and resonating through the gallery has an ethereal and spiritual quality. When you have the opportunity to hear it, think of the Friends, and remember also that the completion of the building had been made possible only with the Friends' support.

The second area of contribution that I would like to dwell upon is that with respect to the UQ Library. The Tribute on the Library website to fifty years of friendship with Alumni Friends of UQ encapsulates so much of what has been so good about the Friends, and what has been at the heart of the organisation.

As the Tribute attests, it has been crucial to developing the Library collection, including the special collections that are held in Fryer. In particular, it was instrumental in the Library's acquisitions of the collections of Raphael Cilento, Dick Roughsey and Percy Trezise, David Malouf, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Thea Astley and Janette Turner-Hospital. The Book Fair is an extraordinary logistical undertaking that involves so many. It has not only raised funds for the broader University but has facilitated the donation of rare books and items of interest to Fryer. The University Librarian, Bob Gerrity, best summed up it:

“Thank you, Alumni friends, for the countless volunteer hours you spend running the association, in being a part of our

community, and in collecting and sorting books so they can find a new home and enrich the lives and the education of more people.”

When it is all taken into account, there is a record that fully justifies the Celebration.

In the case of the University’s Centenary, we also focused firstly on the tangible, quantitative achievements. The measure that tends automatically to be adopted is the number of students. The first intake was in 1911 and was of 87 students. By the time of the Golden Jubilee in 1960, the student body numbered 8,700, at the 75th anniversary it was 18,400, and today it has escalated to over 50,000.

To put that in perspective, the ceremony to mark the inauguration of the University, on 10 December 1910, was itself an anniversary celebration, marking the Jubilee of the founding of the State of Queensland. In his address, the Premier of the day, the Honourable W. Kidston, noted that the population of the new State on its establishment just fifty years earlier had been 24,000, a little under half of the number of UQ students today.

If I may make a small digression, the Inauguration Ceremony was a grand occasion. It was at Old Government House in the Domain, with seven hundred invited guests, one thousand school children marched in serried rows to form the choir, a detachment from the 9th Australian Infantry Regiment, numerous speeches delivered with oratorical flair and colour, and behind a vast gathering of the hoi polloi, too far away to hear the speeches but attracted by the novelty of it all. Equivalent ceremonies today do not have quite the same level of pomp and circumstance.

Returning to my theme, there is, of course, a question as to whether the number of students is a true measure of progress. Certainly, the residents of St Lucia who have visually polluted the suburbs with

signs of objection to the University's proposed master plan think not. There is no doubt that the leading universities of the world that UQ and its Australian peers seek to emulate in the global rankings are far smaller institutions.

It is unfortunate that the misguided funding schemes of successive federal governments have left Australian universities with no option other than increasing student numbers, both domestic and overseas, to cover escalating tuition and research costs.

In a movement against the tide, the UQ Law School has consciously and significantly reduced its intake of students. As part of a comprehensive review of its curriculum and teaching approach, the School has turned its back on on-line tuition and large formal lecturing, instead focusing on face to face seminar interactions. This has coincided with the complete refurbishment of the western wing of the Forgan Smith, which had remained unchanged since my day fifty years ago. It has created an enormously exciting space, incorporating facilities that reflect the requirements of the revised teaching approach. If you have not had the opportunity to have a look, I urge you to do so. It raises the possibility, one day, of similarly bringing new life to the remainder of the Forgan Smith building.

It has, however, been a challenging exercise. The refurbishment could not have been undertaken without the philanthropic support of alumni, and the ongoing financial sustainability of the School will be dependent on overseas and post graduate enrolments. But the quality of the education offered by the School has been raised immeasurably. An extension of a program of such a nature throughout the University would be wonderful, but unfortunately that is not realistic.

It may be, therefore, that just as the best measure of the Friends' contribution is not to be seen in dollar amounts, the focus on the University's achievements during its life should not be on

quantitative figures such as student numbers. Rather we should focus on what has been achieved in a less tangible, qualitative sense.

During the Centenary Celebrations, we emphasised the stirring challenge that was made by Premier Kidston in the course of his address at the Inauguration Ceremony:

“There is a difference between the youngest University in the Empire and the oldest: Oxford was established by a King; the University of Queensland is established by the people. Queensland is democratic not only in her political institutions, she is democratic in her heart and sentiment; and the desire of our people for a University is simply the desire that Queensland may be an educated democracy – the safest, the strongest, and the happiest community in which men can live. I would have the Senate always remember that it was the desire of our people that inspired the crowning of our educational system by the establishment of a University, that in very truth the Queensland University is ‘of the people’, and I trust that the Senate will never forget that it should be ‘for the people’.”

I like to think that the University has met that challenge. I am not sure that I could prove that Queensland today is “the safest, the strongest, and the happiest community in which men can live”, but I do know that there is nowhere else where I would prefer to live. And graduates of UQ have played a major role in making Queensland what it is today. From its 244,000 graduates there have been leaders in every field of endeavour in the State, and there have also been global leaders who have enhanced the standing and reputation of the State throughout Australia and the world. The research facilities of UQ have attracted the best and brightest minds from everywhere, and their presence and the presence of their families have enriched our communities. And the products of their research have changed our lives.

Today UQ is not the only Queensland University, and a story that could be better told is the extent of the supportive role that UQ played in the establishment of those Universities, whether it was QUT, James Cook, USQ or Bond.

UQ can justifiably be proud of its achievements, and I am confident that Premier Kidston would be well satisfied.

But the celebration of an anniversary should not simply be an opportunity for self-congratulation. It should also be a time for a little soul searching for what lies ahead. As part of the Centenary Celebrations, there was a meeting of distinguished alumni to consider a catalyst paper presented by the then Vice-Chancellor on the Universities strategic directions to 2020. Professor Greenfield had identified two broad drivers, globalisation and a highly competitive approach to reputation enhancement. In his words:

“globalisation has driven the need to graduate flexible, broad thinking, culturally aware individuals and that in turn reflects a growing demand among students for exposure to experiences beyond borders.”

That analysis was endorsed by the Alumni and is equally valid eight years down the track. One might ask whether it was going beyond Premier Kidston’s focus on being of and for the State of Queensland, but it certainly resonated with the description of a University proffered by the Governor and soon to become first Chancellor, Sir William Macgregor, in his Inauguration Address:

“What is a University? I have seen a University defined as a place at which students from any quarter of the universe could be received to study, irrespective of nationality. What we understand here by a University, and what we aim at, is an institution where any person can find the fullest and best instruction of the day in any branch of knowledge.”

The Governor went on to say that the University was “a school that will be accessible to all, and will afford equal chances and opportunities to rich and poor alike, without reference to sex or religious denomination. I know of no institution in modern social life that equals the University in giving a fair chance in life to the youth that is capable and is able and willing to work.”

Those words possibly reflect the Governor’s own background and experience. He was the son of a Scottish crofter, and the family was large and poor. He initially worked as a labourer, but his intellectual potential was recognised and fostered by the local school master, the minister and the doctor. With their help and his own perseverance, he went to the Aberdeen Grammar School and then to the University of Aberdeen.

Those words also raised, but did not necessarily solve, the current challenges of funding and accessibility. It is fascinating that the first major issue that confronted the first Senate of the new University concerned the matriculation standards for entry. Notwithstanding his support for accessibility, the Governor in his then capacity as Chancellor, provided the critical support that won the day in a fierce debate over the inclusion of foreign languages, both ancient and modern. As the languages were taught in the grammar schools but not in the State system, their requirement for entry to the University effectively excluded students from the State system. That problem was overcome with time, but the debate with respect to accessibility, in one form or another, continues to the present day.

In our soul searching eight years ago, we were concerned with both the bigger picture, as to where the University should be striving to be in ten years, but we were also pre-occupied with the immediate challenges of surviving in the constrained circumstances that seem always to have been the lot of universities in Australia. When an organisation neither controls the levers that underlie its funding

arrangements and has no certainty as to what those arrangements will be from one year to the next, it is difficult to articulate clearly defined longer term visions.

What then is the outlook for the Alumni Friends? This is a topic which, I am sure, your President and Executive Committee have well in hand. My modest comments are therefore offered only as observations.

I think that you could be forgiven for being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. To state the obvious, the University of Queensland is a very big organisation. Its operating income for 2017 exceeded \$1.8 billion. The current philanthropic campaign seeks to raise \$500 million. Global business leader and alumnus Andrew Liveris and his wife Paula have recently donated \$13.5 million and have pledged to raise an additional \$26.5 million. When confronted by figures of these proportions, those of us who are mere mortals could be forgiven for thinking that this is all out of our league – how could we possibly contribute anything of any significance that would make a tangible difference to this colossus.

The answer to this hesitation is very simple. The University is not a monolithic entity, carved from a single block of granite. It is an extraordinary mosaic composed of individual faculties, schools, institutes, centres, departments and so on, each with its own aims and objectives and each with its own challenges and difficulties.

In my earlier days as Chancellor, I used to liken the relationship between the Vice-Chancellor and the heads of the Faculties and Institutes to that between the kings of feudal England and the barons. Each was dependent on the other, but the pendulum of power was constantly swinging. Fortunately, it never came to a Runnymede situation, and today the organisation is more integrated, and the relationships are more harmonious. But vice-chancellors are far from autocrats, and their desire to be called president rather

than vice-chancellor may be to align with North American practice but may also be a case of wish-fulfilment.

The operating income of UQ is a huge amount of money, but it is allocated across a vast organisation. The process of allocation and re-allocation down to each operating unit is keenly negotiated and contested, and not all, if in fact any, are satisfied.

But it is at the level of the operating units that it all becomes real. Intellectually we can understand the role of the University and the importance of its standing in the global rankings. But what really resonates is the work undertaken by the units, whether it is a body of researchers, a program of teaching, a library facility or a special interest museum. It is at that level where the support that is within the capacity of mere mortals is so important and can make such a difference in achieving what could not otherwise be achieved.

It is at that level where, over the years, the Alumni Friends have played such a critical role. My only advice can be, for the good of the University, continue in what you do so well.

But the other aspect of the Alumni Friends has been the sense of a University community that it has always engendered. In Professor Thomis's History, he noted the founding of the original Association in May 1967, and that shortly thereafter it held its first reunion at the Student Union's relaxation block "and, as part of the entertainment, members, along with academic staff, were invited to attend a garden party at Government House." It is wonderful that such traditions continue.

The most difficult issue that arose during my time as Chancellor was what was euphemistically referred to as the enrolment irregularity. The course of action that we adopted to address that issue carried with it obligations of confidentiality, but what we had perhaps not fully taken into account in taking that course was the extent to which

there is a broader University community and the sense of ownership of the University that the community holds. Our obligations of confidentiality and the community's sense of ownership were in unhappy conflict and it was a challenging period.

But the reality is that the existence of the University community is a huge underlying strength, and the Alumni Friends have played a vital role in maintaining and sustaining that community. Again, I would say, continue on as you have done.

So, in conclusion, thank you for indulging my rambling, congratulations on your Jubilee, and all the very best for what I am sure will be an equally productive next fifty years.