United Nations Day address by Professor Jacobs, President and Vice-Chancellor UNSW Sydney, Parliament of NSW, Sydney, 24 October 2016

I am enormously honoured to be here to join your celebration of United Nations Day. The UN Australia Association has been in existence since 1946 and the efforts you lead to ensure a more informed, peaceful, prosperous, livable, resilient and modern multicultural Australian society are just as important now as they were then.

I will take this opportunity to offer some reflections on the role of universities – including my own, UNSW – in making the world a better place for everyone.

That's a simple enough phrase – 'making the world a better place for everyone' - but as those associated with the U.N. would know, it's also the toughest of missions to take on. Our world resists both organization and simplification and grows more complex every day. We face a paradox in the times we live in: vastly more information, technologies that dazzle us with their speed and efficiency, and medical breakthroughs that improve and extend our lives, whilst for much of humanity life has become more hectic, anxious and uncertain and sadly the inequalities in society ever greater.

If we reflect back to when the United Nations was shaped in San Francisco, in 1945, much of the world was in ashes. Cities and nations needed rebuilding and there was a real threat that another war, a nuclear war would end civilisation. The alterative was 'to make the world a better place for everyone', and to create an international forum where differences between nations could be aired, and responsibilities shared, and peacekeeping would replace conflict. The U.N embodied those ideals, and - for all its struggles and setbacks – for over half a century it has played a role in reducing armed conflict and improving the lives of millions. We can be grateful to those visionaries of 1945 and to all the Australian's who have served the UN and other multi-lateral organisations as Peace-keepers over the past 69 years who we remembered with pride and thanks at the Cenotaph earlier today.

Around the same time, another great vision was taking hold, with the same mantra, 'to make the world a better place for everyone': the belief that universal education could lift humankind out of this perpetual struggle away from conflict and misery. And we saw, in the postwar boom of prosperity, the rise of what became known as the 'new universities.' the first European universities - in Bologna back in 1088, in Paris in 1150, at Oxford in 1167 – started as a 'community of teachers and scholars' and they evolved into elite institutions that offered little hope of entry for the children of any but the rich or well-connected. That changed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Britain and America, with so-called 'redbrick' universities in major cities, opening up higher education to students of different social status, to women, to the needs of local communities - to answer not only the profound philosophical and scientific questions but to address the immediate problems of society. The trend towards these 'new' universities funded largely by governments took off

worldwide after 1945, and accelerated rapidly into the 1960s and 70s. Even the old elite universities became open to all and many more young people from all backgrounds to access the benefits university education can provide. Like many of you here today I was one of those people as the first in my family to go to university.

And, in Australia, UNSW Sydney is perhaps the prime example.

We began in 1949 as the New South Wales University of Technology, with the aim of building an institution that would carry forward the profound developments in human knowledge and concern that had produced such exemplars as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology - focused on teaching and research in science and technology, but exploring too the humanities, social sciences, economics and politics. Sixty-seven years of dynamic growth later, UNSW maintains that mixture of sustained innovation, deep scholarship and practical application of results. Last year we embarked on our 2025 Strategy, a ten-year plan aimed at placing us amongst the top 50 of the 25,000 plus universities in the world - but more importantly through that as Australia's global university, having a major positive impact through our social engagement and global priorities in the communities we serve, locally, nationally and beyond Australia's borders.

Universities are complex organisations. Not as complex as the U.N. perhaps, but still very large in their scope and ambitions, and in their daily operations. UNSW has around 6,000 staff and more than 50,000 students – which makes it around the same size in numbers as Australia's defence forces. Some universities around the world are even larger: some have enrolments into the hundreds of thousands. As they grow, universities can easily become entities unto themselves, inward looking and competing with each other for resources and students and staff, leading to the common accusation that they are 'ivory towers' and 'not part of the real world'. That is a danger for all large institutions, and something that runs contrary to what I believe universities should be about.

As the world faces unprecedented challenges, universities are expected to fill many roles. They're seen by governments as providers of professionals and creators of wealth, as drivers of innovation; they're expected to help solve the world's problems, including economic crises. It is worth noting that we do contribute enormously to economic growth - last year we produced a report with Deloitte's showing that Australian universities through the research and ideas they push out in to society contributed $160 billion to Australian GDP - that is 10% of our GDP. That is important but universities are about much more than that. They are built around people - and human capital is the main product of universities. Ultimately, it is that human capital which will make the world a better place for everyone.

At UNSW our Strategy incorporates - along with the pursuit of academic excellence in education and research and the use of that for economic benefit – two activity strands every bit as important, which take us directly out into the world: social engagement, and global impact. I believe that great universities are servants of their society and the global community. A hallmark of that is playing a major role and an *active* role in transforming

humanity for the better. A great university does not stop at the edge of campus, it links seamlessly with the surrounding society and is, in turn, influenced and shaped by that society and its needs. Universities should be role models for the communities they serve, displaying transparency and openness, providing a platform encouraging freedom of thought and expression, and a wide diversity of views.

Universities should reach out and help, just as - on a far broader scale - the United Nations does so. Certainly, UNSW often feels like a smaller version of the 'united nations' - we have around 14,000 international students from well over 100 nations and partnerships with over 400 universities in 39 countries. Recently we've joined with Kings College London and Arizona State University to form the PLuS Alliance (PLuS for Phoenix, London and Sydney universities), to maximize our global reach and impact. We're developing new technologies to make that happen, including importantly online learning which will give access to literally millions who otherwise could not obtain higher education.

What matters in this effort is of course the knowledge acquired through education and research, but equally the application of that knowledge to the real world. To that end, we've established at UNSW an Institute for Global Development and set ourselves the goal over the next decade of improving the lives of one-million people - in the South Pacific, in Asia in Myanmar, and on the other side of the world in Uganda. Already our efforts in the developing world include over 250 projects in public health care, climate science, energy and water, sexual and reproductive health, maternal health, AIDS/HIV, defence and security, post conflict trauma, and migration. So we are acting - directly engaging with the world - and we're getting on with it.

We've also set up a program of Grand Challenges, for debate discussion and thought leadership on the big issues that are dominating the global agenda. Currently we are focusing on two: our climate change Grand Challenge led by Professor Matt England, and our migration and refugees Grand Challenge led by Professor Jane McAdam. Today I would like to refer in particular to the second of these, to refugees: the most graphic representation of the troubles currently facing the world, and of the vulnerability of our existing social and political systems. According to the UNHCR, in 2015 there were more than 60-million people in the world uprooted from their homes by conflict and persecution. Two-thirds of them are internally displaced; the rest have fled their countries, seeking asylum. To put that in starker terms, last year over 30-thousand people were forced to flee their homes *every day*. And there's no indication things will improve: Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, and large swathes of Africa are in the grip of protracted conflict, and people are disconnected from their families and cultures, and desperate.

This is not only the great moral conflict of our times, but is having – as we have seen recently in Europe – profound impacts on the fabric of established and well-developed societies. It is bringing out the best in the people, and, alas, sometimes the worst. Many of us were deeply moved to see television news images of the women of the Greek island of

Lesbos giving sanctuary to Syrian refugees making their way across the Aegean from Turkey. The fact that the women were Orthodox Christians and the refugees mostly Muslim did not matter. What few of us realized was that the parents and grandparents of these same Greek women had themselves fled from Turkey almost a hundred years ago, also as refugees. And what almost nobody realized was that some of the Greek refugees from Turkey *then* had fled not westward but eastward, and were cared for in Damascus - by Syrians.

On grand challenges like this I believe universities can and should play a greater role. Our resources can have massive impacts on the lives of refugees, whether in medicine or crisis management, in international law, in language teaching - and even philosophy. The nature of empathy, prejudice, and the acceptance of others calls as much for our attention as do more practical issues around resettlement, education and employment. By engaging directly with refugees and adopting a hands-on approach to their problems, universities will be not only making the world a better place by transferring knowledge to those who need it most, they will be developing their own human capital, and becoming finer institutions in the process.

Today in the world we see less and less consensus. In a world of 24/7 news cycles, the notion of the Future has been replaced by a daily scramble to win popular approval and stay in power. Is it any wonder that electorates across the world are becoming more fickle, less trusting of the political establishment? Who talks of ten or twenty-year plans anymore?

Could universities working with organisations like the UN and UNAA take us away from that cycle of cynicism and mistrust and become a direct force for change in the way society operates? I for one passionately believe we can. But for that to happen, we need to open a wider door to the world, so that everything we do will have social value and global impact - the university acting as a servant of society. And we need to constantly monitor what we are doing and ask ourselves what the world needs, to move forward in troubled times. That is, I believe, the hallmark of a forward-looking, 21st century university. At UNSW we have begun that long journey, with our own ten-year plan, shifting from 'what is' to get to 'what could be', and working out the best ways to translate that into real benefits for all of humanity.

Not to go there would a great failure of the imagination that has brought us this far.

Thank you.