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# Indo-Pacific Governance Research Centre

## Policy Brief

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# Reinventing the Public Mission of the Research University in the Asian Century: A gateway approach

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### Key Points:

- Different forms of internationalisation will consist of varied types of balance between private and public purposes and benefits pursued by our research universities.
- One dominant mode of conceptualising internationalisation is not only in terms of private or market benefit, but also in terms of enhancing national economic competitiveness.
- We need to conceive the mission of the public university as a gateway for a shared cooperative enterprise to meet societal challenges, provide a common space for research infrastructure and a domain for public engagement across the region.
- We confront great societal, scientific, and economic problems such as inequality, environmental degradation, and health, across national boundaries. The research to deal with these problems requires a global and regional collaborative infrastructure. Universities are well placed to provide these collective goods but much of this research infrastructure needs to be funded and staffed nationally.
- If we are to see ourselves as a research gateway, the major Asian research universities may well have locations within an international research precinct at the very heart of an Australian campus or campuses.

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The recently released White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century reflected a consensus that higher education is at the cutting edge of our Asian engagement. To this end the White Paper prescribes an important role for public universities in the unfolding Asian Century. It suggests that universities – like other public and private institutions – should deepen our engagement with Asia.

But what does this deep internationalisation mean for our public research universities? The argument in this Policy Brief is that varied forms of internationalisation will have different forms of balance between private and public purposes and benefits pursued by our research universities. Internationalisation or the ‘deep internationalisation’ proposed by the White Paper challenges us to consider the public purposes and benefits beyond the box of ‘national state’, and yet achieve this without letting the market model dominate the ‘public’ enterprise of the research university. As Simon Marginson (2012) – an astute observer of higher education – has maintained: how do we redefine the ‘public’ as universities operate on global and regional scales?

Tackling this question seriously means redefining the mission of the public research university in the Asian Century. Any such redefinition needs to confront the challenge of fostering public or collective purposes, benefits, and beneficiaries, all of which are regional and global in scope. We need to conceive of the mission of the public university as one providing a gateway for shared cooperative enterprise to meet societal challenges, a common space for research infrastructure, and a domain for public engagement across the region.

Of course by tradition, as Cardinal Newman amongst others argued, universities have always produced knowledge which is universal in scope, character, and benefit. Yet, the practical governance of the research university – its funding, its methods of accountability and its legitimacy – has developed within the context of the ‘national’ projects of the state. And this is especially important in the rapid post-war expansion of the university sector in the US, Australia and other OECD countries. The public character of the university has been modified or adjusted in relation to broader changes in patterns of public policy and political economy. In this context, the strategy of deep international engagement proposed by the Asian Century White Paper reflects the way universities are enmeshed in broader transformations of public governance (Calhoun 2012). However, we need to think critically about reinventing the public mission of the research university in this changing context of internationalisation of higher education, and the different strategies that might lead to this objective.

This is all the more important because one dominant mode of conceptualising internationalisation is not only in terms of private or market benefit, but also as a means of enhancing national economic competitiveness. For example, in the White Paper higher education looms large in driving innovation in the economy as an export sector, and as the foundation for building a so-called ‘Asia capability’. It places an emphasis on Asia capability, collaboration, and mobility across all sectors, particularly in higher education, as a way of enhancing national economic competitiveness. It

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seems the region is always out there ushering in new opportunities and challenges for our public and private institutions.

As such, it reinforces a set of intensely powerful market drivers pushing our universities towards deeper engagement. These include the maturation of the great expansion of international student enrolments due to the high dollar and increasing competition between the US, Europe, and Asia for the international student market. This has propelled a move towards ‘off shoring and branch campuses’. Whilst these activities are crucial to the economic sustainability of these universities, it is hard to see how running a low cost off-shore university for business students can be anything other than a shift in the balance between public and private benefits in favour of the latter.

On the other hand, considerations regarding national economic competitiveness loom large when it comes to the White Paper objective of creating or promoting high ranking research universities. It seeks to place ten institutions in the top one hundred though it does not attach any particular public investment strategy to this lofty objective. On this view, universities pursue activities and programs to promote positional goods – the value of which depends on their respective quality rank – that are seen as central to the public mission of our large research universities. Leading Asian universities with more coherent public investment and rationale are pursuing similar objectives. Recent changes in higher education regulation are designed to foster the emergence of a market for these kinds of goods. There are some spill-over benefits in innovation in the pursuit of these positional goods (although the links and beneficiaries are uncertain and complex). But these benefits are not just narrowly economic; they are also couched in terms of creating national champions.

This is a rationale that sits oddly with the injunction for collaboration and cooperation with the region. Moreover while it champions internationalisation the strategies are seen in terms of enhancing national economic competitiveness, a notion that is still trapped within a national frame and where the public benefit purpose (be it national or global) remains unclear. Consequently if we are to see internationalisation as something more substantial than a link in an economic chain we must reinvent the public mission of the university beyond the national scale. How should this be done?

### **Strategic Alliances and Global Public Goods**

One of the keys to deep internationalisation is to build strategic alliances, particularly with major Asian universities. The development of such alliances will be crucial to deepening internationalisation strategies. However, if these strategic alliances are to be more than merely instrumental or the artefacts of managerial fiat, they must be focused on addressing issues and problems that deal with common social, scientific, and technological problems that we all share.

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infrastructure. Universities are well placed to provide these collective goods, but much of this research infrastructure is funded and staffed nationally. If we are serious about reinventing the public university in the Asian Century, it is clear that individual institutions as well as funding bodies across the region will have to play a crucial role in facilitating this shared research infrastructure to deal with these societal challenges.

To do this we need to conceive of this ‘shared infrastructure’ as a global or at least regional public good (see Marginson 2012) essential not only for dealing with key societal problems, but also as way of reinventing our public mission in the Asian Century. In short, it provides one way – and by no means an exclusive way – of reinventing the public character of our research universities in the Asian Century. These comments do not imply that the promotion of a positional goods market is inconsistent with these objectives. It may well be central, but these policies need to be sewn into the broader fabric of a global Public University.

The approach outlined here would not only redress the balance between private and public benefit in strategies of deep internationalisation. It would also be more effective and sustainable over the long run. Such sustainability can only be achieved through communities of researchers working on common problems, building alliances from the ground up.

### **International Research and Communicative Precinct**

One of the problems in the White Paper is that the ‘region’ always seems out there. Why not conceive of this collaborative enterprise as a gateway for research, and even debate between different modes of inquiry and understanding within the precincts of our own universities? Internationalisation is not out there, but in here building and shaping a ‘public domain’ which extends beyond the national educational boundaries. Surely, building such a public domain is crucial if we are to deal with the inevitable tensions and conflicts – and we shouldn’t shy away from them – of the shift of wealth and power from the Trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. This implies a gateway model for Australian public research universities – a model centred on bringing the process of internationalisation and the region into the very heart of the University itself.

This gateway model has implications for how we organise research not only in responding to great societal and technological problems, but also at the level of furthering basic scientific research. In an age of fiscal austerity the era of ‘big science’ can be sustained only if we are willing and able to invest in shared infrastructure tethered to collective benefits. But if we are to see ourselves as a research gateway, it might mean that major Asian research universities may well have locations within an international research precinct at the very heart of an Australian campus or campuses. This flips around the way in which internationalisation is usually conceived and it forces major changes in the way grant funding bodies such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) deals with foreign universities. For too long the ARC has viewed international collaboration in instrumental terms – such as encouraging and promoting cooperation with foreign partners – but unwilling to substantially fund

these researchers and institutes. In the long run this may not be the most effective way of positioning our major universities in the region.

The gateway model outlined here gives life to the notion of deep internationalisation which is often the plaything of emirs, economic technocrats, and property developers. It is a model that can reinvigorate the public role of research universities in the Asian Century to deal with some of the complex global and regional challenges of our time. This is bound to be bracing for Australian as well as Asian universities. But then, this surely is the point.

### References

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#### **IPGRC Research Mission**

A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.