

# THE ROAD AHEAD

Outgoing UTS Chancellor, Vicki Sara AO, reflects on her achievements and the coming challenges.

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After 11 years as UTS Chancellor, Professor Vicki Sara is devoting a few precious months to herself. But don't mention the R-word. "Gosh no," she laughs when asked if standing down from the chancellor role marks her retirement. "I'm having a gap year."

There is a lot to organise in her personal life, she explains: things she has been too busy to attend to during the second phase of her professional career as one of Australia's key defenders of university education – including two stints as Chair of the University Chancellors' Council.

But she's too good a political operator, and too committed to improving Australia's contribution to high-end research, to walk away from a fight now.

The final months of her chancellorship coincided with Malcolm Turnbull's elevation to prime minister and his call for "an ideas boom". With "innovation" the new mantra, this might seem a godsend to universities.

However a key focus of the \$1.1 billion plan the Prime Minister unveiled in his "Innovation Statement" in December was the need to strengthen ties between the business community, universities and scientific institutions. In future, he implied, universities should concentrate on research which yields a commercial benefit for Australian business. Professor Sara knows more about innovation, research and their application to "the real world" than most. Not only was she an internationally renowned research scientist involved in groundbreaking discoveries about the human brain at Sweden's Karolinska Institute from 1976 to 1992, she was the Chair (and later CEO) of the Australian Research Council and a member (during John Howard's leadership) of the prime minister's Science Engineering and Innovation Council.

"This discussion about industry linkage has been going on for 15 years. It is nothing new," she says firmly during her final interview as UTS Chancellor in February. She adds, "What is lacking in the discussion in Australia today is an understanding of the quality of the research that underpins that linkage to industry. It is very populist terminology to talk about simple innovation."

If Australian universities have forged less profitable connections with industry than their European and North American equivalents, that is more a reflection of economic reality than want of trying, Sara insists. "There are huge industries there with the money to invest in research and development. We don't have a lot of that here. What we do have, or have had, is world-class researchers."

The Australian research community does have links with both Australian and international companies, Sara continues. But she fears the push to concentrate on research which delivers immediate commercial benefits for Australian business is both naive and dangerous.

"You can't shift money, which is happening, from fundamental research of the highest quality over to mediocre research because it will get you a contract with industry," she insists. "You need to maintain the excellence of Australian research."

In fact, she explains, Australian universities have made a huge leap forward in terms of industry connections since she returned from Sweden in 1993. At the Karolinska Institute, Sara and other researchers had thrived, partly because of the close relationship with private enterprise.

"We had enormous support from global pharmaceutical companies, no ties attached, the very best equipment," she recalls. "I was used to working hand in glove with industry. ●"



Professor Sara has taken a new role as the Patron of UTS' Creating Futures Bequest Society.

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Photography: Terry Clinton



Photo: Encapture Photograph

But when I came back to Australia I was surprised that it hadn't happened here. Obviously there weren't the same companies available. But there was an attitude within universities which was still a 1950s attitude.

"The funding was a lot less here in Australia. It still is. The investment the government makes in research is very much less."

Nevertheless, UTS is a beacon of what can be achieved even under an imperfect system. As chancellor, Sara has never been a mere figurehead. Asked to name her proudest achievements at UTS, she says: "The facile answer is 'Look at the campus!' You can see we've changed the physical face of the university over the past 10 years. But that's not the key to the success of the university. It's always the people who count most.

"Over the time I've been chancellor, this university has changed markedly. It has become a research-intensive university, and that has been the achievement of the staff and students of the university.

"We have moved up in our rankings today to being recognised as the top university in Australia under 50 years of age. That's a huge step forward from where we were 12 years ago. Today we're up among the top 10 universities in Australia.

"Twelve years ago, UTS had a very fine reputation as a teaching institution, with professional connections – a job-ready kind of place.

"But it wasn't a research-intensive university. Today it is. That has been the major achievement of the last decade. We've become a force to be reckoned with in Sydney – in Australia, in fact."

Born and raised in Bondi, Sara's passion for science was planted at Sydney Girls High School.

"At school I had a most wonderful biology teacher," she says. "Everyone in my situation can always go back to a teacher. Mine was Mrs Ruth Komon. Her husband, Rudy, started the Komon Gallery in Paddington. She would teach us about biology by bringing in Fred Williams paintings into school. Really fabulous."

Sara was just 16 when she began her science degree at the University of Sydney. "I was a miserable failure in my first year," she concedes. "We're talking about the '60s. I had a wonderful time, but study wasn't part of it."

Instead she got involved in theatre and filmmaking, deciding to switch to an arts degree after the first year.

"I studied psychology, philosophy, anthropology, but the one thing that has kept me in good stead all my life has been philosophy. It gave me a new way of thinking."

By the time she graduated, Sara had become fascinated by the human brain and how it worked. "I wanted to study how the brain grows," she explains. "What happens inside the brain, inside the cells and the nervous system."

At that point, a lot was known about how the body works – but very little about the workings of the brain. For her PhD, Sara chose an immense topic: What makes the brain grow?

"The structure of the brain was set very firmly in pre-natal development," she explains. "If something goes wrong in the first



**TOP LEFT:** Professor Sara awards an honorary doctorate to Bangarra Dance Theatre Director Stephen Page.

**LEFT:** Professor Sara hosts the first Bequest Society luncheon of 2016.

**ABOVE:** Professor Ross Milbourne, Sydney lord mayor Clover Moore, Professor Sara, Sir Gerard Brennan, and Dame Marie Bashir at UTS's 25th anniversary celebrations.

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semester, or the beginning of the second, there's permanent damage to the structure of the brain. I wanted to know how the brain formed. And that's not a question you do with an arts degree!”

So while she worked on her PhD (at the Garvan Institute of Medical Research and Sydney University) she simultaneously completed her science degree.

The PhD earned Sara the University of Sydney's Tasman Lovell Memorial Medallion for the Best PhD in Psychology. But she couldn't proceed with her research without leaving Australia. In Sweden, the team she worked with identified a secondary substance that produces a growth hormone in the foetus, and found a way of making it by biosynthetic process.

She returned to Australia determined to make a difference to the standing of research, and in doing so has flown a standard for women in science. “I was the first woman to be head of the Australian Research Council. I was one of the first to be a dean of science, and I believe one of the first women to be a chancellor,” she says. “But it is very hard for women. Choices have to be made.”

Does she believe more women should be encouraged to take STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects? “Women have always been attracted to the biological sciences rather than the hard sciences, the physical sciences – although there are exceptional women in the physical sciences in Australia.”

One role she has agreed to take on in her “gap year” is Patron of the UTS Bequest Society, Creating Futures. Her decision was influenced by the different attitudes she believes exists between Sweden and the country of her birth. “In Australia, we still have an elitist approach to (tertiary education), even though it might be something that is not right for everyone.

“Personally, I think it is appalling we pay so much for education here. I don't know the answer, or where we'll find the money. But that is why I am committed to creating scholarships. Education is not a privilege. It is a right everyone should have.”

Her attitude has been formed by family experience. “My mother left school when she was 12 to work in a factory. I don't ever want to be part of a society where that happens again.

“I want to use my money, my knowledge, everything I've learned, to enable me to provide scholarships.”

She reveals that she and her partner will be making a bequest in their will “to support scholarships to provide opportunities for study at UTS”. And yes, she will be using her undoubted powers of persuasion to convince others to make bequests too.

However there's one thing that makes her slightly wary about being Patron of the Bequest Society. Though she's “extremely good at getting money from government for research” – and from companies – Sara is “a bit shy” when it comes to asking individuals.

She's confident she will conquer her diffidence, but is also conscious of the sensitivity of the subject: the decision to make a bequest gift is an intensely personal one.

Interview concluded, she hurries off to her next chancellor duty. Only later is it announced that the new Science and Graduate School of Health Building, where the interview has been conducted, is to be named after her. A permanent and fitting memorial. ■■■