Vice-Chancellor’s Speech Notes

Opening of Curtin University, St Georges Terrace, March 2 2016

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you Simon for that wonderfully moving welcome to country.

As is customary at Curtin I too would like to begin by recognising the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wadjuk people of the Nyungar nation, and paying my respects and thanking their elders past, present and future.

Where we stand tonight – between the modern day Perth Convention Centre and Parliament House – was an area where the Wadjuk people used to trade and feast.

We acknowledge the significance of this place to the Wadjuk people. Its link to Aboriginal history and culture adds to the importance of this location to the University.

I would also like to acknowledge:

- The Honourable Peter Collier, Minister for Education; Aboriginal Affairs and Electoral Affairs
- The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor, Lisa Scaffidi
- Our colleagues from the National Trust of Australia WA: The Honourable Michael Murray AM QC, Council Chairman; Mr Max Kay, President; Mr Julian Donaldson, CEO
- The Honourable Malcolm McCusker AC CVO QC
- Chancellor of Curtin University, Mr Colin Beckett; Members of the Curtin University Council; my senior colleagues
- Distinguished guests; ladies & gentlemen
The opening of Curtin University, St Georges Terrace – formerly the Old Perth Boys’ School – is a very significant step for the University.

It signals our future – being even more engaged with industry, the corporate sector and business, as a core partner in an integrated innovation system.

At the same time, it takes us proudly back to our roots.

This building at one time housed the Perth Technical School, which later became Perth Technical College. When the WA Institute of Technology, Curtin’s predecessor institution, was founded in 1966, some elements of the Perth Technical College were incorporated into the new Institute, and in 1970 ownership of this building was transferred to WAIT for a period of seven years.

In addition, WAIT students were taught here in the Institute’s earliest days before the Bentley campus was completed.

The honour roll of those who studied here is very impressive. It includes

- Sir Walter James, WA’s fifth Premier and a champion for social reform who coincidentally was also responsible for the opening of the Western Australian School of Mines in 1902, which of course has been a highly valued part of Curtin since 1969
- Margaret Feilman, Perth’s first female town planner
- Mattie Furphy, an artist who became a leading contributor to WA’s emerging arts and crafts scene
- Geoffrey Summerhayes, who was an influential architect in the state
- and Frederick Bell, who was the first Western Australian to win a Victoria Cross following action in the Second Boer War.

This brief snapshot gives us a hint of the rich history of the building, which is so entwined with our own history as an institution.
In fact, a number of the areas originally taught when the Perth Technical School first opened here in 1900 are still major areas of teaching and research at Curtin, including chemistry, geology and art and design.

As we fast forward to the 21st century, our move back to the Old Perth Boys’ School is significant not only because of history, but because the move is entirely in keeping with our ambitions to be a core part of the future economic infrastructure of our state and nation.

As we all know, innovation is the buzzword of our time, closely followed by entrepreneurship and, for those of us in the university sector, research translation.

And for good reason: The Prime Minister’s launch of the National Innovation and Science Agenda last December made it clear that innovation is fundamental to Australia’s growth.

It will help equip us for the social, economic and environmental challenges ahead.

Innovation, and the resulting development of new goods and services, will be the core drivers of productivity growth as we transition into a knowledge economy.

Better translation of research into commercial outcomes is a key part of the Government’s Agenda.

Australia research is widely recognised as world-class – for such a small country, we ‘punch well above our weight’ in terms of research output, generating around 3.7% of the world’s scientific output.

But where we fall behind is in terms of collaborating with industry and commercialising good ideas. As Bill Ferris, chair of Innovation and Science Australia told a CEDA event in Sydney earlier this week, and I quote:
“Only 5 per cent of all Australian businesses have any engagement with our universities” … “A lot of businesses don’t know where universities are”  

We need deeper and more effective collaboration and engagement between universities and the business community.  

Former Chief Scientist of Australia, Professor Ian Chubb, agrees, warning that "it will take three to tango" and I paraphrase:  

- The government needs to get the policies and incentives right  
- The research community needs to be aware of how the world works, ask the important questions, and push the application of that knowledge; and  
- Industry needs to be less risk-averse and take on partnerships that foster R&D and innovation on a much larger scale.  

One of our problems is that our universities are often siloed both physically and culturally, disconnected from industry.  

But there is only so much outreach we can do: if we want to get meaningful research translation into industry, we need to make ourselves much more accessible to industry.  

And this is exactly what our new site here on St Georges Terrace is all about – it is designed to ensure that we become more accessible; more industry linked, and more connected with our industry and business partners.  

It also provides a CBD location for prospective students and alumni to connect or reconnect with the University.
Curtin has been in the city since 2003, when the Graduate School of Business opened at 78 Murray Street. More recently we have relocated our Law School to a building across the road at 57 Murray Street, which will ensure that our students are closely engaged with the legal profession throughout their studies.

And, just as we are expanding our city presence, we have also commenced Stage 1 of the work to transform our Bentley campus into a vibrant economic and innovation hub by 2030.

So, on the eve of our 30th anniversary as a university, and 50 years since our founding as WAIT, we see our institution as a key focal point in the innovation landscape and what better way to do this than to establish a presence here on St Georges Terrace.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Curtin’s Properties, Facilities and Development, and Corporate Relations teams, both of which have worked so hard to design a space in this beautiful building to maximize its modern use.

Our very visible presence in the city is a demonstration of our willingness to adapt and engage and, in the words of John Curtin and our University motto, to “look ever forward”.

It is also a demonstration of our absolute alignment with the national focus of innovation and entrepreneurship, so much so that I was delighted to see the recent ads promoting the Government’s ‘ideas boom’ in the bus shelters along the Terrace!

Thank you.