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- Andrew Deeks

# New direction for Murdoch leadership

After a decade spent in Europe, Andrew Deeks' homecoming heralds a period of renewal for WA's second-oldest university.



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ANDREW Deeks exudes positivity, inclusivity and openness.

That was clear during an almost hour-long conversation with *Business News* earlier this month, in which the incoming vice-chancellor of Murdoch University expounded upon his vision for the school.

Professor Deeks sees a place where students are taught to value social justice and the environment, academics know their pupils on a first-name basis, and the door to opportunity is open to more than just year 12 graduates.

In nominating his priorities, Professor Deeks appeared keen to fashion himself as a progressive and pragmatic leader, less enthused with corporatisation and league tables than a university's principal business of teaching and research.

These are heady, noble causes for a university administrator, not least of all for an academic whose PhD in engineering was stodgily

titled 'Numerical modelling of large deformations associated with driving of open-ended piles'.

They're also loftier ambitions than Murdoch, which has traditionally differentiated itself in the market on the strength of its veterinary and agricultural sciences schools, has ascribed to in recent years.

Still, it's a vision Professor Deeks thinks will resonate as he begins his five-year term in the top job.

"I've talked to people who have graduated from Murdoch recently, and they speak of this facilitation of them in a life journey where no other university had a path for them, but Murdoch had a path for them and looked after them, and then they've been very successful as a result of that," Professor Deeks told *Business News*.

"That's the point of difference. "It's a package, in terms of a values-based university that cares for its students, that cares about the

environment and where we're going as a society."

There were enough public hints of Professor Deeks' guiding principles when he was appointed late last year.

While he has spent more than a decade in university administration overseas, first at Durham College in the UK and then at University College Dublin, Professor Deeks was reared and schooled in Perth at The University of Western Australia.

Having earned his PhD there in 2004, his departure after five years leading UWA's engineering school came amid the university's embrace of the so-called 'Melbourne model', in which degree structures were simplified and postgraduate studies became integral to employability.

Professor Deeks confessed that model, which drew the ire of student unions and academics, never sat well with him, and was a major reason

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Andrew Deeks is Murdoch's new vice-chancellor.  
Photo: Jordan Murray

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behind his decision to relocate and take a pro vice-chancellor's role with the UK's third-oldest university, after Oxford and Cambridge

He clearly did something right in his five years on the job, having widely been credited as an integral player in lifting Durham's position on Times Higher Education and Quacquarelli Symonds rankings during his tenure.

Thanks in no small part to his record on that front, Professor Deeks trumped a host of internal candidates to be named the second non-Irish citizen to lead UCD, a university so ingrained in the Irish psyche that it's best known in literary circles as cultural milieu for the protagonists of James Joyce novels.

His deft touch with league tables didn't quite carry over to UCD, however.

While the university's place in Shanghai Ranking remained relatively stable during his tenure, it dropped from 139 to 177 on QS's numbers and plummeted on the Times Higher Education list from 129 at the start of his term to the 251-300 band by the time he left.

Those numbers fail to provide a full representation of Professor Deeks' management of the university's operations, however, with surpluses reported every year he was vice-chancellor, including the first year of the pandemic, when it stayed €7.8 million in the black.

Full-time staff and student numbers grew in 2021, too, alongside an increase in profitability to €34.8 million.

To his credit, Professor Deeks doesn't shy away when these numbers are put to him.

He defended UCD's decline across league tables as a reality of Ireland reaching the end of the 'Celtic Tiger' era, a decade-long period of growth ended in the late 2000s with the collapse of the property bubble.

UCD was hardly the only university affected by the country's economic decline.

Trinity College Dublin, the university's closest competitor located on nearby River Liffey, between 2014 and 2021 fell from 129 to equal 146 on the Times ranking, and from 61 to 108 on QS's list, while languishing in the 151-200 band on SR's table.

While on multiple occasions he telegraphs a disdain for league table rankings and, by extension, the rationale for a state-wide merging of WA's universities, Professor Deeks provides clear reasons why the subject irks him.

"We [at UCD] always looked at how we were doing in terms of the student



Andrew Deeks previously led universities in the UK and Ireland. Photo: Jordan Murray

## “The story about the university suing an employee was not a good one - Andrew Deeks

satisfaction, the student faculty ratio and the research performance, and making sure we were in the right direction there, not paying attention to what the newspaper rankings were doing, for those reasons,” he said.

Among those achievements was a series of infrastructure projects undertaken during his tenure, typified by an ongoing, €1 billion expansion of the university's Belfield campus.

“The student numbers went up, faculty numbers went up, the facilities were developed, and the performance of the university went in the right direction,” Professor Deeks said.

“At the end of my tenure, people who had come on that journey with me were content with what had been achieved.

“The artifact which is the university rankings shouldn't take away from the fact that the performance of the university in every measure was enhanced in a period of time.

“That's what I will be looking to do here at Murdoch; again, not paying attention to a single number, which is a ranking, but ... making sure we're having a real impact and not paying too much attention to rankings which, after all, are there to sell newspapers rather than anything else.”

An obvious culprit Professor Deeks cites in declining rankings is the dwindling supply of government dollars, an issue as vexed for Irish universities as it has been in Australia over the past decade.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he described Tanya Plibersek, the

incoming education minister who will lead Labor's promised universities accord, as someone he believes brings far greater knowledge of the sector than recent ministers.

That's not to say he necessarily opposed the previous government's record on higher education, specifically as it related to its controversial jobs-ready graduates reforms.

On that matter, at least, Professor Deeks was willing to concede that governments, as funders of universities, were within their right to set priorities for the sector – a view that appears at least partly influenced by his time in Ireland, where universities have less autonomy within the public sector and were particularly affected by austerity measures throughout the 2010s.

Still, he made the point that shuffling money between courses, as the reforms have done, wasn't good policy.

“It's much more helpful if the government wants universities to go in a particular way to add additional money, which then adds additional capacity to the universities, allowing them to go in the direction the government may want them to go,” Professor Deeks said.

His sense of even-handedness didn't extend to the previous government's interventions in the Australian Research Council, which decides where research funding will go and, sensationally, became subject to a series of high-profile ministerial vetoes under Stuart Robert.

Professor Deeks left little unsaid on his view of Mr Robert's actions.

“I don't think it's helpful for any minister to be getting involved in where grant money is going,” he said. “Clearly it should be down to academic expertise and academic judgment.”

Academic freedom is clearly a priority for Professor Deeks.

Prosecuting and protecting it can prove vexed, however, as evidenced in February last year when Professor Deeks was reported to have said the head of his university's school of politics had ‘overreacted’ in describing a stoush between Huawei and Ireland's defence department over statements critical of the Chinese telco a ‘threat to academic freedom’.

To say such blunt words sum him up would be unfair; in person, he comes across softly spoken, articulate and unerringly polite.

When that incident was put to him, though, he didn't shy away from the substance, insisting that while academic freedom protected the right of researchers to criticise the telco, it did not preclude the company from defending itself.

Unprompted, he drew on another highly publicised incident to illustrate his point, mentioning how he had stared down pressure from staff and students to sack UCD academic Dolores Cahill at the height of the pandemic after she had earned widespread notoriety for voicing anti-vaccine rhetoric and COVID-19 misinformation.

“It was [a situation] where I had to defend a colleague whose views I didn't agree with at all against other colleagues and, again, students who were trying to take action against them on the basis of their views,” Professor Deeks said.

## Data &amp; Insights

## How did Murdoch's performance compare to other universities in 2021?

	Murdoch University	Curtin University	Edith Cowan University	University of Western Australia
<b>Students</b>	<b>23,296</b>	<b>59,939</b>	<b>30,450</b>	<b>27,972</b>
<b>Staff (FTE)</b>	1,641	3,081	1,953	3,270
<b>Total Assets</b>	\$1.34bn	\$2.25bn	\$1.87bn	\$2.84bn
<b>Total Revenue</b>	\$392.3m	\$996.1m	\$533.1m	\$1.18bn
<b>Operating Profit</b>	<b>\$14.6m</b>	<b>\$113.3m</b>	<b>\$78.9m</b>	<b>\$203.5m</b>
<b>Times Higher Education Ranking</b>	501-600	251-300	401-500	132
<b>QS World Ranking</b>	581-590	=194	651-700	93
<b>Shanghai Ranking</b>	501-600	201-300	501-600	96

"That's where academic freedom works; it protects the academic from any sort of disadvantage in the university environment caused by their views.

"I've always tried to be reasonable, but sometimes that reasonableness, taken out of context, can be misrepresented."

Professor Deeks wouldn't be the first to get journalists offside, with his new university similarly earning reams of negative publicity amid reports in recent years of poor morale and faltering leadership.

Finances tell a different story, with Murdoch staunching losses in the second year of the pandemic to turn a \$6.3 million deficit into a \$14 million surplus.

Rancour doesn't seem to reflect the mood of students demonstrated in surveys, either.

While data from the latest QILT (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching) review, conducted for the 2020 academic year, showed Murdoch students marking the quality of

their education experience down by nine percentage points, from 79.8 to 70.8, on the back of a steep decline in learner engagement ratings, both results were part of a broader national decline.

On learner engagement measures, Murdoch actually limited its losses compared to the national average.

Still, to ignore reports of a cultural malaise, typified by a series of highly publicised imbroglios between the university's administration and staff during the pandemic, would be an oversight.

Some disputes, such as previous vice-chancellor Eeva Leinonen's decision to scrap face-to-face lecturers and cut staff, were broad enough to avoid extended scrutiny.

That's in contrast with the university's decision to cut niche courses, such as Indonesian language studies, at the expense of the hard sciences, drawing the ire of staff, students and unions in the process.

And while Professor Leinonen stood by key operational decisions in her

last conversation with *Business News* prior to joining Maynooth University, comparatively little was said publicly about Murdoch having operated with a short-term renewal of its university status from July 2021.

It was the second time the university had faced the wrath of national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, relating to governance concerns.

That issue, while resolved (TEQSA in March extended Murdoch's university registration for a full seven years), served as a painful reminder of the university's last run in with the regulator, which came after the fallout of a 2019 report by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that alleged the university was one of many to have allowed international students to enrol with substandard English literacy skills.

Readers may remember the debacle had the unintended consequence of elevating academic and whistleblower Gerd Schröder-Turk to folk hero status as Murdoch attempted to remove him

from its Senate and, subsequently, took him to court seeking millions of dollars in damages for his involvement in the ABC's reporting.

The case was eventually dropped, and Professor Schröder-Turk has remained a passionate critic of corporatisation and funding cuts to higher education in WA.

Asked to address the situation with Professor Schröder-Turk, Professor Deeks accepted a negative narrative about Murdoch had formed.

He admitted he would not have taken legal action in that situation and said he had since extended an olive branch to his Senate colleague.

"I meet with him regularly, and I have personally let him know that, in my view, he was treated rather badly," Professor Deeks said.

"So, I think we can ... put that behind us.

"The story about the university suing an employee was not a good one.

"It went around the world; it came to Ireland, people talked about it.

"This is not where the university wants to be.

"It's not a decision I would have made, and I won't be making [that sort of] decision going forward."

Keen as he was to put those matters behind him, Professor Deeks didn't ignore them, and made a point of acknowledging where he thought mistakes had been made and what the university could do to improve.

Having told *Business News* he would like to serve as vice-chancellor beyond his five-year term and until the end of the 2020s, Professor Deeks appeared confident in his ability to bring the university closer to his earlier stated vision as a leader in diversity, sustainability and, at some stage, a university of first choice for high school graduates.

"I'm very much looking forward to the future," he said.

"I think it's very bright for Murdoch."