

**Association of Commonwealth Universities—Centenary Conference
Future Forward: Taking Charge of Change
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**I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE
The New Relationship Between Universities and the World They Serve**

Colleagues, friends: It is a pleasure to be with you, and an honour to speak to you—but never more so than on this special occasion for the ACU. *Always leave 'em wanting more.* That's the hidden ethic of Broadway theatre, and it's Broadway that provided the inspiration for the title of my presentation today. I have no doubt that whatever I have accomplished in my time with UBC, whatever any of us may accomplish as Vice-Chancellors, we *will* leave 'em wanting more. And then our successors will be faced with the chorus we've all been listening to for several years now: I love you. You perfect. Now *change*.

I love you, you're perfect, now change. Those three little phrases *nobody* wants to hear. Whether it's government asking us to 'tweak' our research agenda to speed up commercialization; industry questioning our ability to meet the need for skilled workers; grantors placing geographical limits on eligibility for funding; or students wondering why our entire course calendar and library system aren't online yet; we are getting it from all sides, in every relationship we're a part of. We love you, we need you, you're fabulous, now if you could just be ... *different*.

You're not commercial enough; not "pure research" enough. Not practical enough; not academic enough. Not local enough or national enough. Not digital enough; not real-world enough. *Not enough*. Relationships! They're enough to make a university president and vice-chancellor run for the self-help books. Or, more realistically, given our schedules, to an Internet Top 10 list.

I did, I Googled. I admit it. I did it for all of us. And you're going to want to hear this:

- *Top 10 Advantages of Being in a Relationship* – these include "higher self-esteem" and "not having to dress up all the time," both of which I would argue about in our case;
- *Top 10 Excuses You Make to Stay in a Bad Relationship* – these include, "But it's *comfortable!*"
- And last but not least, *Top 10 Relationship Killers* – number one of which is "changing yourself to please—or to try to hang onto—your relationship partner."

I could have called my presentation "Managing Change on Your Terms," but I didn't because I thought we could really use a more provocative perspective on the situation right about now ... as well as a bit of a laugh. The laughs have been hard to come by lately, haven't they? Ernst & Young's "University of the Future" study last year quotes our colleagues in Australia saying, [1] "It's going to be a tough decade." [2] "Our major competitor in ten years' time will be Google ... if

we're still alive!" And [3] "There will be 15 to 20 independent global brands ... the rest will be playing for the silver medal." The study's working hypothesis, which I contend is valid not only in Australia but everywhere, is that the dominant university model—of a broad-based teaching and research institution supported by a large asset base and a large, predominantly in-house back office—will prove unviable in all but a few cases over the next 10 to 15 years. That is a very tiny time horizon for an institution that got its start in medieval times. Don't get me wrong: we know how to survive, and we know how to evolve. We've proven that. But what we're facing now is the need to transform ourselves to a greater degree and in a shorter span of time than we have ever accomplished before.

Management consulting firms are profiting nicely from the quiet panic prevailing in cloistered hallways all around the world. Each one offers its own version of the Top 10 list and then we scramble to tick every box. First, there's the list of so-called "change drivers," and you're familiar with them all:

- increased competition for students
- increased competition for funding
- decreasing government funding
- increasing costs per student
- proliferation of digital technologies
- global mobility
- increasing need to integrate with industry
- the urgent need for skilled workers

- advances in our understanding of how people learn
- government and student demand for more outcomes-based measures of performance
- global interconnectivity
- developing countries' exploding demand for higher education
- and the catch-all: globalization

I am sure to have missed a few; the list seems to grow every day.

And then there are the well-meaning—and, occasionally, the self-serving—recommendations as to how we should all proceed. “Maintain the status quo, but streamline,” is one. “Dominate a particular market niche,” is another. “Become a teaching-only institution,” is a third. “Merge with other sectors, such as media, innovation, and venture capitalism, to create something entirely new” is yet another. The common denominator, the phrase I hear in association with every recommendation, is the necessity for *radical transformation*. When I became aware that that’s what I was hearing, it hit me: We’re doing that thing. We’re doing that thing people do when someone says, *It’s not you, it’s me. I love you, you’re perfect. But this is just not working.*

We’re doing that thing: We’re changing ... *to please.*

Hipper hairstyle. Sexier clothes. Wittier remarks. Brighter laugh. We’re tap dancing like crazy, only someone else is in control of the music, and we *know*

that no matter how fast or how fantastically well we dance, we still might not get a part in their show. We still might get dumped for our shinier, glossier rival.

Social media. The new matchmaker, pick-up bar, relationship display window and dumping ground all in one. Facebook, for example, offers 11 choices when it comes to declaring your relationship status. One of those 11 is “It’s complicated.” That’s us! That’s universities—with every single one of our stakeholders and constituents and partners. Complicated. “Sorry folks, it’s complicated, because, you see, we’ve got all these change drivers buffeting us about, and recommendations from all sides as to how to respond, and it’s just so enormously complicated!”

Except ... *it’s not*. Perhaps it’s even simple—the problem *and* the solution. So much so that it’s been staring us in the face for, oh, about 800 years now. Let me be clear: We do need to change, we need to change a lot, and we need to change fast. The process will be difficult and even painful at times, and the ACU may look very different 10 years from now. I am told by change management experts that the majority of institutional efforts toward transformational change fail; 70 percent, in fact. But ‘difficult’ is not the same as ‘complicated.’ And ‘vital change’ is not the same as ‘*radical* transformation.’ ‘Radical’ means ‘root.’ It means changing in essence. And if we do that—and some of us are already making moves in that direction—we’ve lost. We may need to make drastic

alterations in order to carve out our place in this brave new century. But what will enable us to survive and thrive through the next 10 challenging years is holding fast to our medieval mission. How's that for radical?

I thought about writing my own "Toope's Top 10 Tips for Surviving the Make-or-Break Decade." But you know what, it's really hard to remember 10 things, and I wanted to give you something you'd remember. So I have just one: one change driver that you can use as a lens to look at all change drivers; and one criterion you can use to evaluate every next step.

The Change Driver

The common denominator of every driver of change, from digitization to climate change to global mobility, is direct experience. Direct experience: either the desire for it or the absence of it. Universities arose out of an ecclesiastical culture that presumed a responsibility for mediating its followers' experience of the sacred. That paternalistic dynamic stayed with us even after our transition to secular institutions, and has perpetuated that 'ivory tower' reputation among those we're meant to educate and serve that persists to the present day. My bottom line: to the extent that we as institutions continue to mediate or even block direct experience, we will falter. To the extent that we are able to provide or increase access to it, we will succeed.

Other sectors have led the way for us, demonstrating both what to do and what not to do. The music industry now has its iTunes, and the film and video industry, its Netflix. In both cases, the end user has access to all available content at any time and in any way she wants it. No more commercials. No more waiting a week for the next episode. No more LPs where someone else has decided which songs she'll hear and in what order. The business model is both economical for the user and profitable for the owner. Music and screen artists are directly available to their fans via social media as well as all the traditional channels.

The publishing industry, on the other hand, is still figuring it out. eBooks, which were supposed to revolutionize the industry, have turned out to be nothing more than print analogues—ironically. They're not a new business model because they're not a user-driven way of accessing content. Meanwhile, the growing success and credibility of self-publishing both in print and online is mystifying the industry's captains; don't readers *need* Random House to tell them what's worth reading? And so the mergers and closures and bankruptcies continue.

The proprietary, exclusionary control of content is obsolete. Every change, from the ones that are upon us to the ones we can't see coming, is going to be driven by people's desire for ever more direct experience. Every one of our failures will be borne out of our inability or our refusal to provide it or to get out of the way.

It is a university's job to lower barriers that limit or disallow direct experience. I'm talking about the invisible barriers between individuals of different backgrounds, cultures, and orientations on our campuses that Sir David King talked about; I'm talking about the borderlines we've drawn between our campuses and the communities we serve; the boundaries between disciplines, fields, and faculties, and those between our institutions that exist because of geographical distance or philosophical difference or market share competition.

I'm also talking about the barriers—from financial to political—that keep too many local students and scholars homebound and too many would-be international students and scholars locked out. We claim to be graduating global citizens, but how many of them have traveled? How many have had a transformative encounter with someone whose views and beliefs differed markedly from their own? How many, actually, have left our campuses after four years without ever having thought seriously about how their fields of study—whether music or mathematics or marine biology—relate to the fundamental challenges of our day?

Universities too often shy away from the social realities of deep diversity. We have arrived at this critical juncture in collective university history partly because of our fear of crossing those borders and boundaries and barriers I just described. We are afraid of the no-man's-land of contested values. We seek to find consensus before we allow for the kind of spirited dialogue that sharpens

understanding. We prize comfort over robust and challenging debate. We Canadians are known for our tolerance, and we're pretty good at it. But we're not so good at principled, open-minded engagement with individuals and institutions and cultures whose values are not compatible with our own. A Canadian fault or a universal one? You decide.

I will say that universities' failure so far to fully democratize access to direct experience—whether it be information or intercultural encounters—is based in fear. *Our* fear—of losing control. Of being irrevocably and detrimentally altered.

So what do we do? Is there one magic criterion by which every decision in the difficult decade to come may be safely gauged? I believe there is

Be yourself.

It's the one thing all the relationship gurus and Top 10 lists agree on. In any event, everyone else is already taken.

Universities have a mission that is unique in all the world: to *serve* the world, through the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, and the creation of new knowledge. That is our task, and our task alone. We may need, now, to figure out new ways to do it, and as Sir David emphasized this morning, our graduates are facing a different world than the one we graduated into. But we do

not need to become something entirely new, or figure out something new to do. We do not need to fear having it taken away from us, but we should take a hard look at our own readiness to relinquish it, like a baby with bathwater. Our survival rests in holding to the unique and necessary role we carved out for ourselves 800 years ago. Our challenge lies in the fact that we are no longer optimally organized to fulfill it.

Up until now, we have managed to evolve alongside the rest of society, allowing everything from returning war veterans to the feminist revolution help shape the institutions we've become. Free-market capitalism, too—so that we have become better organized for competition than collaboration. Our collegial system of governance, largely a positive trait, can be a hindrance when it comes to responding to high-speed change such as we're undergoing now. We're nation-based, and our national systems do not fully support our need for mobility. And we are often preoccupied with superficial measures of reputation, short-sighted research funding, and commercialization over sustainability.

Why? It would be easy to blame a lack of money. But I don't. I blame a lack of service. We have forgotten to serve. *Or* we have forgotten the value of the core service we provide.

Universities change the world! It's what we all came here to do. It's what Sir David challenged us to do. It's what attracts our students, our staff, our faculty:

the *direct experience* of putting our unique gifts into service to the world. It should be our point of attraction for everyone we partner with. But are we providing clear pathways for that? Are we clear, ourselves, that that's what we're offering? The money is there. It's part and parcel of the desire to serve. So we're not making the 'big ask;' we're making the big offer. The biggest: *We change worlds. Join us!*

Show—don't tell, show—your political leaders of every stripe the economic long view, and your place in strengthening it. Offer your faculty members incentives for crossing barriers of discipline and geography. Reward your staff for the ways they contribute to sustainability, intercultural understanding, international engagement. Expand free access to course content. Add online components to your face-to-face classes, and vice versa. Ask your fellow university network members what you could do to increase engagement with them. Take a leadership role in creating an innovation hub in your city or region. Some of this stuff doesn't even have to cost anything.

One final thought: It's time to pull our focus away from rankings. University rankings are predicated on the assumption that we are all trying to be the same thing, which is to say, all things to all people. In this time of hyper-diversity and specialization, I can't think of anything more likely to precipitate your institution's demise. Universities exist to serve the world through the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, the creation of new knowledge, and lighting the fire

of inspiration in our graduates. The form that takes can and should be utterly unique to you.

UBC is a global leader in the study, teaching, and practice of sustainability, and we have turned our Vancouver campus into a living laboratory. Internationally, we have a long history of fruitful engagement in Asia, so much so that we are asked by government offices to provide introductions. Are we equally invested in Eastern European literature? No.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” Know yourself. Know your value. Let your barriers down and invite in the messiness of transformation. Change structurally if you must, but don’t change *radically*; keep your medieval roots. They’re what make us what we are. And the world needs us, more than ever before. Thank you.