

Universities have a key role to play in bushfire recovery

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12:00AM JANUARY 22, 2020 •  14 COMMENTS

This summer's bushfire season will go down as a landmark moment in our nation's history. Make no mistake: this won't be a fleeting tragedy that disappears from public consciousness as soon as the smoke clears. This will be our 9/11, with the after-effects to be felt in our environment, economics, culture and leisure patterns for years to come; perhaps — at long last — even in our politics.

Already, the bushfires have been Australia's most searched term on Google of the past decade, more than twice as popular as the next-ranked topic, Donald Trump's 2016 election. We also have attracted sympathy — and scrutiny — from abroad, with blanket coverage in international print and digital media.

This is the moment when the abstract, warming global temperatures, became real; when spin met reality: devastated wildlife, communities in peril and cities blanketed in thick, acrid smoke.

So, what does this mean for the higher education sector? What changes in the aftermath of our own 9/11? What opportunities present; what risks arise?

We can think about this across three dimensions: mission, finance and operations.

Universities have had culture and knowledge at the heart of their missions for centuries. How does our world work? How is it changing? How do our societies work? How do we advance the greater good? What is the greater good?

In a world where natural disasters can last months on end and disrupt vast areas of our country, understanding cause, effect and response becomes ever more important. From the science of

atmospheric models to teasing out social, economic and political impacts and responses, universities have a vital role to play.

The scientific revolution has brought endless levels of new knowledge and benefit. Ask a mother or father whose child is now far likelier to make their first birthday. Science and reason are life and planet-changing. The knowledge mission remains as relevant as ever.

In the short term, universities will be called on to advise on adaptation and risk mitigation. Where and how might communities live in the future? How should land-use patterns change? How can we prepare for and minimise the impact of fires, drought, floods and other natural disasters?

And at the root of it all: what are the long-term causes of climate change and how can they be mitigated?

There will be research opportunities, policy advisory roles, increased demand for degree-based and professional education. Above all, we should see a renewed receptiveness to science and reason.

Universities and their resident experts would do well to adopt a humble response. Offer a quiet, calm elucidation of cause and effect, certainties and open questions. Let shrillness be the preserve of an isolated fringe.

Nothing is more humbling than finance — the revenues that universities need to do their work. What will be the impact of the bushfires on university funding?

The short answer is mostly negative. In the mid-year economic update, the Treasurer revised the forecast 2020 budget surplus down from \$7bn to \$5bn. Since then, the government has announced \$2bn of bushfire response funding, with more to come.

Tax receipts are likely to decline in the short term as economic activity collapses in bushfire-ravaged communities.

The government has abandoned its surplus-at-all-costs rhetoric. But don't expect a new-found openness to budget deficits. Rather, expect the Coalition to aim for a balanced budget, providing it with a new narrative: "We're responding to the bushfires and still balancing the books."

This means non-bushfire related spending will be very tight. Universities across Australia are aiming for increases in commonwealth-supported place funding beyond national population growth, especially in high-growth metropolitan areas. This will be a very difficult argument for Education Minister Dan Tehan to win in cabinet. Don't count on it when you're setting your university budgets and capital spending plans for the next three to five years.

Perhaps the only "winners" in financial terms will be those universities that already have had favourable funding responses from the Coalition: regional universities. The bushfires will strengthen the hand of Tehan and his office in securing funds for implementation of the Napthine review of regional, rural and remote tertiary education.

Operationally, the fires will affect universities with campuses in bushfire-affected areas as they accommodate delayed enrolments, support affected staff, and aid students and communities in need. Insurance costs will rise steeply for regional universities across the nation.

Perhaps the biggest operational impact will be to support and accelerate universities' drive towards the environmental sustainability of their own businesses. Most Australian universities have a carbon-neutral or zero-carbon goal, with 2030 typically the target date. This will soon be a norm. Chief operating officers across the country will find themselves well supported in pursuing these goals.

Internal and external expectations on sustainability will grow across the board. Universities that maintain legacy investments in fossil-fuel firms, even if through third-party managed funds, will come under intense pressure to divest those investments.

They will look for ways to use water more efficiently, reduce waste and grow recycling. They will implement "living laboratory" concepts, turning campuses into engines of innovation around modern, sustainable living and economic activity.

Many universities have been investing in these types of activities for years. But to the extent that this has been optional or regarded as peripheral to core business, that will change.

Some of the leading British universities declared a climate emergency last year and announced a comprehensive set of responses. The language might be shrill. The actions aren't.

The landscape has changed, metaphorically as well as physically. The role of universities as pioneers of science and human understanding and exemplars of possible ways forward is redoubled. Decades of work lie ahead. Let's get started.

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