

HE FEST

Australasia's Premier Marketing, Recruitment and
Advancement Conference for the Tertiary Education Sector

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

22 – 23 September 2026

Ainsworth Building, 1 Wally's Walk
Macquarie University, Sydney

PRESENTED BY



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HE FEST DAY 1

Tuesday 22 September 2026

PLENARY — GROUND FLOOR, AINSWORTH BUILDING

8:15 AM **Registration**

8:50 AM **Welcome & Opening Remarks**

9:00 – 9:30 AM **Keynote: Challenges and Opportunities Ahead**

Professor S. Bruce Dowton, Vice-Chancellor, Macquarie University

The fifth Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, Professor S. Bruce Dowton is a paediatrician, clinical geneticist, molecular biologist, researcher and academic. He is one of the longest-serving current leaders of an Australian university; joining Macquarie in September 2012. He will share his insights into changes within the HE sector and what the future might hold.

9:30 – 10:10 AM **Why Universities Matter More in the Age of AI**

Professor Eric Knight, Deputy Vice-Chancellor People & Operations, Macquarie University

Artificial intelligence can give us answers. But who will teach us to think?

As artificial intelligence rapidly reshapes how we work, learn and access information, what is the enduring value of universities?

This keynote will explore why critical thinking, trusted expertise and informed debate matter more than ever in an age where AI is a powerful tool, but not a substitute for human judgement and empathy.

It will consider how universities can help society navigate echo chambers, misinformation and increasingly polarised public conversations, while uplifting audiences with the knowledge and expertise they need to engage thoughtfully with the complex issues shaping our world. As the role of universities faces increasing scrutiny, we must show how we enrich public knowledge, understanding and debate — a core mission since our foundations. Staying true to this mission has never been more important.

10:10 – 10:40 AM **Keynote: Truth in an AI World**

Michael Miller, Executive Chairman, News Corp Australasia

Michael Miller is one of the most influential people in the Australian media – Executive Chairman Australasia of News Corp, Chair of the Premium Content Alliance and Director of Foxtel, among other roles. He will share insights into the challenges of presenting truth in an AI world.

10:40 – 11 AM **MORNING TEA**

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

	STREAM A-GROUND FLOOR	STREAM B – FIRST FLOOR
11 – 11:30 AM	How we built a campaign around care <i>Neil Cullingford, Murdoch University</i> Universities often talk about purpose, impact and student success, but few campaigns connect institutional positioning, authentic storytelling and recruitment messaging in a way that feels genuinely integrated. In this session, we'll	Insights from the Govt Relations Desk <i>Robin Shuck, Director of Government Relations and Policy, UNSW</i> As the tertiary sector grapples with regulation, funding constraints, and an attempt at generational transformation, there has never been a more important time to understand how governments work and how we should work with governments.

share how Murdoch University developed Care x Career – a brand platform built on a distinctive institutional truth: that care isn't just a value we talk about, it's how we teach, support, research and engage with our communities.

We'll explore how we moved beyond advertising slogans to create a campaign with intellectual rigour, emotionally compelling stories and a messaging framework that translates seamlessly into faculty, course and conversion-focused recruitment marketing.

Robin Schuck, Director of Government Relations & Policy at UNSW, will discuss challenges and opportunities in engaging Governments. This session will look at the fundamentals of getting better results from government relations, motivations in politics and ways forward for the sector in working with government.

**11:30 AM –
12:00 PM**

**It's not just a university, it's UTS —
Insights into a UTS marketing campaign**
David Rogan and Millie So, UTS

Millie So, Dave Rogan, and their UTS Marketing and Comms team realised that a central, authentic message was required to “Reconnect our staff and students with a shared sense of purpose and reignite pride and passion in the institution during time of significant change.”

After a challenging year of headlines for the institution, the marketing team leaned into the theme of unconventional excellence, building on the perceptions that prospective students held about UTS and focusing on the institutional differentiator – comfort and pride in taking unconventional routes to outstanding outcomes.

The campaign was very successful against the backdrop of a challenging year, with a 7% increase in brand favourability for industry and a strong consolidation of the university's brand at a critical moment in the institution's history.

SurfStrong: Recruiting a national research cohort without paid advertising
Natalie Schenken, PR Mgr, Bond University

How do you recruit hundreds of older surfers for a university health study without biasing the sample?

SurfStrong began with a specific scientific question and became a national recruitment campaign built around trusted surfing figures, an industry partnership, earned media, boardrider clubs, social channels, events and broadcast-ready content produced in-house.

The campaign recruited 574 eligible surfers, 44% above target, on a non-salary budget of just \$1,245.90.

This session will explore how Bond University turned a complex research recruitment problem into a story that resonated with surfers, and the practical lessons for universities trying to reach specialised audiences with limited budgets.

12 – 12:30 PM

Reframing the message — the Wicked Problems campaign
Peta Pool, Director, Strat Research Profile and Engagement, Flinders U

Built on a report that identified Australia's pressing problems, the Flinders University Wicked Problems campaign reversed the traditional approach of preaching at audiences – instead, making community priorities the start of research conversations.

Why the Best Agency Relationships Aren't Entirely Rational
Michaela Lobb, Director of Marketing, University of New England

When Michaela Lobb joined the HE sector 18 months ago as Director of Marketing at UNE, it was obvious a few things needed to change. She had to brush up on a myriad of acronyms and structures; but she also had the chance to ask why – and why not.

Shortlisted in the Future Campus 2026 Awards in the Communication category, this Campaign achieved an audience reach of 9 million, with 280,000 content views across articles, videos and other content based on 40 research impact stories. It is a repeatable and scalable framework for communicating research impact that Flinders will continue to use. This was an exercise in positioning, and it certainly boosted the profile of Flinders and provided a framework for future success.

Building stronger partnership with agencies wasn't a matter of ditching the old and starting afresh, but instead looking at how the university worked with partners, and identifying how they could each do more.

The result was not just a dynamic and highly successful early entry campaign, but also a much stronger level of buy-in that now has 70 people working towards a common goal, despite a tight budget

12:30 – 1:10 PM

LUNCH

1:10 – 1:40 PM

Why PR is having its Glow Up Moment

Lindsay Bennett, Global Comms & Content Lead, Ideally

AI is rewriting how organisations get discovered, trusted and chosen, and communications is moving to the centre of the marketing mix.

In this session, Ideally's Global Communications and Content Lead Lindsay Bennett explores the new rules shaping the industry, and how to exploit them.

As AI increasingly shapes what gets surfaced and cited, earned media and PR are having their glow up moment. Lindsay will share case studies, new data and practical frameworks for boosting AI visibility, turning your organisation into a citable source, and claiming emerging GEO opportunities before the competition does.

Building brand while also delivering on short-term enrolment growth

Justin Laing, CMO Uni of the Sunshine Coast

Despite low budgets and a smaller brand footprint Justin Laing and the marketing team at University of the Sunshine Coast developed a high impact, low budget campaign that they created in conjunction with a production company, covering 18 locations in five days but always making real students the centre of the frame.

A tight brief, crystal clear alignment with the university's character and values lead to great results - a 30% increase in consideration and a 7% increase in preference for the university following the campaign launch.

Justin will dive into the challenges and opportunities of the campaign, sharing lessons from the process.

1:40 – 2:20 PM

Western's New Brand — In Conversation

George Williams, Vice-Chancellor, & Andrew Younis, CMO, Western Sydney University

'Charge Towards Change' is a new brand platform unveiled by Western Sydney in August. In this session, Vice-Chancellor George Williams and CMO Andrew Younis will discuss the process of listening to the community, rethinking the university's brand position, and creation of a new

Finding the Right PG student for the Right Course in the Age of AI

Justin Lyster, CMO, Online Education Services (OES)

Online Education Services (OES) is a leader in high quality online education delivery and works with a number of university partners. With AI changing how working professionals discover, research and evaluate postgraduate study options, universities have an opportunity to move beyond lead generation and focus on helping students

campaign approach, all while working within a tight budget.

The conversation about the brand will provide insights into the role of a university in community, at a challenging time for the sector.

find the course and pathway that best fits their career goals and ultimately support better student outcomes.

The session will explore:

- How the evolution of AI is changing postgraduate student decision-making - from how they research units (LLMs, social media etc), through to the value they place on formal qualifications
- Personalisation, human support and the future of recruitment
- What the future of postgraduate recruitment looks like.

The “U CAN @ UC” Brand Identity Relaunch Campaign

Renee Murphy, Director, Student Recruitment & Marketing, and Brittany Champness, Deputy Director, Marketing University of Canberra

By 2025, the University of Canberra had a problem. Not an awareness problem. Not even a reputation problem. A belief problem.

UC had gone through restructures and deficits. Student growth was essential, not just an aspiration, but rebuilding the University’s belief in itself was also critical.

Research indicated that UC could gain affirmation by not only owning its accessibility and its pride in students who didn’t usually fit the elite school leaver mold, but also building an ‘emotionally resonant identity’ around that concept. The UC campaign was built around the value that education belongs to everyone and shot on some unforgiving January days with the mercury nudging above 40 degrees. The effort paid off. Applications to UC increased 10% year on year and domestic CSP demand rose 60% in Semester 2 2026 alone.

2:20 – 3:00 PM

Insight from the Media

Sally Rawsthorne, HE Reporter, Sydney Morning Herald

After seven years covering crime, Sally Rawsthorne took on the role of Higher Education Reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald in late 2025.

She holds law and international studies degrees from Macquarie University and has worked in a range of journalism roles since 2010.

This session offers an opportunity to see the sector from the eyes of the newsdesk, providing insights into the way the media works and how universities are portrayed in the news cycle.

3:00 – 3:20 PM

AFTERNOON TEA

PLENARY — GROUND FLOOR, AINSWORTH BUILDING

3:20 – 4:00 PM

Keynote: The Future of Australian HE

Julian Leeser, Shadow Minister for Higher Education

The Shadow Minister for Education and for Indigenous Australians, Julian Leeser, has a long association with Higher Education. After an extraordinary career as a lawyer, we was appointed a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University from 2006-07 and served as Director of Government Policy & Strategy at Australian Catholic University from 2012-16, before being elected as Member for Berowra.

He will share insights into the Coalition's perspectives on higher education, looking at issues including regulation, governance, social licence and AI.

4:00 – 4:50 PM

Feature Panel: What Do Schools Think?

Chaired by Maria Souris, Executive Director, Future Students at Macquarie University, with Robin Chand (Chatswood High School), Christine Cawsey AM (Rooty Hill High School), Brother Stephen Hogan (Oakhill College) and Phillip Heath AM (Barker College)

This engaging session provides an opportunity to hear perspectives from secondary schools on the role of universities and the HE marketing and recruitment process.

4:50 – 5:00 PM

The Wrap

EVENING – SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Networking Drinks and the Conference Dinner will be held at Henry Deane at Hotel Palisade, 35 Bettington St, Millers Point NSW 2000.

The venue: Henry Deane is on the fourth floor of the Hotel Palisade, offering exceptional cuisine and drinks with extensive views across Sydney Harbour and the CBD.

How to get there: The Palisade Hotel is 5 minutes walk from the Barangaroo metro station.

6:00 – 7:00 PM **Networking Drinks & 2026 Future Campus Awards**

Informal networking with delegates and speakers and presentation of the 2026 Future Campus Awards

7:00-9:00 PM **Conference Dinner**

Evening conference dinner. A conference dinner ticket is required to attend.



HE FEST DAY 2

Wednesday 23 September 2026

PLENARY — GROUND FLOOR, AINSWORTH BUILDING

8:15 AM Registration

8:50 AM Welcome & Opening Remarks

9:00 – 9:45 AM **Built, not branded: How universities actually build brand and reputation — from the inside out.**

Zeenat Fayaz, Founder, The Brand Education

UK Brand and Social Licence expert Zeenat Fayaz has worked with universities in the UK and Australia on rebuilding brand and addressing social licence. She is Founder of The Brand Education and published in leading publications including HEPI, as well as being the host of The Brand Education podcast which brings together leaders from across higher education.

9:45 – 10:20 AM **12 Months is a Long Time in the HE Sector**

Professor Andrew Norton, Monash University

Australia's leading Higher Education Policy expert, Andrew Norton has had a feast of legislative and regulatory changes to focus on over the past year. Andrew will discuss the very latest legislative changes, as well as key issues and initiatives over the past year, and their implications for the Higher Education Sector.

10:20 – 11:00 AM **From Xero to Hero — Five things tertiary education needs to change, from commercialisation to agility**

David Thodey, Chancellor, University of Sydney; Chair of Xero

As a former Managing Director of IBM in Australia and then CEO of Telstra, David Thodey is no stranger to technology and the interests of Australians. Now serving as Chair of Xero and also Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Mr Thodey will discuss a range of issues that the HE sector currently faces in a wide-ranging Q&A.

11 – 11:20 AM

MORNING TEA

STREAM A – GROUND FLOOR

11:20 AM – 12:00 PM **A short history of Australian university philanthropy**

Marcus Ward, VP Advancement, Griffith University

In 2013, with a few weeks of each other, the universities of Melbourne and Sydney announced Australian HE's first ever comprehensive philanthropy campaigns with a combined eye watering goal of \$1.1bn to be achieved over many years. Fast forward to 2025, and the combined impact of philanthropy across 29 Australian HE institutions likely exceeded \$1 billion from almost 50,000 donors. But it hasn't all been plain sailing

STREAM B – FIRST FLOOR

Workshop — How do we start to address public dismay at HE's perceived relationship with AI

*Professor Jana Bowden, Macquarie University
James Giggacher, Macquarie University
Zeenat Fayaz, Founder, The Brand Education,
Tim Winkler, Future Campus*

This is a workshop aimed at exploring key issues in the tertiary sector's use and management of AI and their impact on the sector's reputation and success.

The session will begin with a concise panel discussion, followed by small group

and is the value (or cost) of philanthropy and large but disparate alumni communities well understood or indeed realised against institutional ambition, mission or license? Marcus will provide some candid insights on the journey so far, the trends, the successes and yes some of the failures. But most importantly how does this inform what's happening now and into the future. An interactive session, Marcus is keen to invite feedback on his assessment and to provide some honest views to probing questions.

discussions of key issues. It will conclude with sharing key insights and identification of potential practical actions that might begin to address the issues.

The public perception of what unis are doing with AI (allowing cheating, becoming irrelevant) is very different to the sector perception, and to reality. It is one of the biggest challenges for universities to start to reclaim their social licence.

The goal is to create a space to extend engagement in a key challenge area.

This session will run until lunchtime (11:20-12:40) and will be interactive, starting with a short panel discussion, then small group work, with a goal of developing fresh perspectives on ways to bridge the understanding gap.

The goal of the session is to draw on the insights and perspectives of the panel and the group to examine practical approaches the sector could begin to implement to shape change.

12 – 12:40 PM

Deadly Pathways: Building a Relationship-Led First Nations Recruitment Ecosystem

Matthew Granfield, Executive Director, Customer Experience, Charles Sturt University

Heather McGregor, Interim Pro Vice-Chancellor, First Nations Strategy Charles Sturt University

This is a fascinating project which will have relevance to every tertiary education provider right now.

Charles Sturt University implemented a highly successful First Nations recruitment campaign grounded in authentic storytelling and built from insights and discussions with community. The campaign cost about \$50k and First Nation enrolments increased by 19%. The campaign, which was shot by a First Nations film company, achieved views of 650,000.

12:40 – 1:20 PM

LUNCH

1:20 – 2:00 PM

The kids are alright. Student-led social media and why unis should share the keys to content kingdom

Vanessa Saines, Manager Social Media & Online Engagement, Macquarie U

We all know the challenge fast-paced, scroll-based, short attention span social media platforms present, especially for places as *serious* as universities. How do you grab -- and keep -- attention amid all

Six students walk into your inbox

Elissa Newall, Senior Partner, Edified

Behind every enquiry is a prospective student trying to answer an important question: *Is this the right university for me?* But, what actually happens after they click 'submit'?

Follow six prospective students as they make contact with Australian universities, from a Year 12 student to an involved parent to a career changer returning to study. Their individual stories are the entry point to a

the noise and content, especially when you are trying to speak to students? Part of the answer lies in letting the students speak for you.

In this session, you will get the lowdown on how student-led social media content and campaigns are making their mark at Macquarie University; helping students better connect with vital support services, personal and academic opportunities and building a campus culture based on belonging, inclusivity and connectivity – with a dash of virality to boot.

much bigger picture. Behind them sit almost 500 mystery shopping enquiries across 30 Australian universities, revealing what prospective students actually experience when they reach out for information and support.

Together, we'll explore where institutions are winning, where students are quietly walking away, and what students think about the responses they receive from AI compared with universities. Combining real student experiences with benchmark data, practical examples and a few standout comparisons from the UK, you'll leave with fresh insights into the moments that build trust and some quick wins to help you improve conversion.

2:00 – 2:40 PM New Approaches to Measuring Research Impact

Professor Abid Khan, DVC (Research & Enterprise) ACU

Australian Catholic University have introduced a new approach to prioritising and measuring research, based on human flourishing. This approach focuses on the impact of research in improving the wellbeing of community, and provides a strikingly different approach to research and community engagement. Australia has not had a national framework to measure research since the ERA ceased in 2018, so ACU's new framework is significant and will be viewed closely by others across the sector.

Insights into communications and the future for HE

Professor Merlin Crossley, DVC (Academic Quality) UNSW

Expert scientist, Deputy Vice Chancellor championing students, writer and now chair of The Conversation, Merlin Crossley brings a unique perspective on the role of universities and what we need to do to improve communication outcomes.

2:40 – 3:00 PM AFTERNOON TEA

PLENARY — GROUND FLOOR, AINSWORTH BUILDING

3:00 – 3:45 PM Good to Sea U — A case study in knowledge transfer and research impact

Vanessa Pirotta, NSW Woman of Excellence 2025, Lecturer, Macquarie University

In 2025 Vanessa Pirotta won a Eureka Prize for promoting understanding of science and was also named the NSW woman of excellence. She has been named a superstar of STEM and runs a thriving citizen science program called Wild Sydney Harbour. She will share insights into what really matters when engaging the community in research.

3:45 – 4:30 PM The Pressure Test: Exploring Ways To Explain AI in HE

Professor Danny Liu, The University of Sydney

Danny Liu is internationally recognised as a leading experts in AI in education. From his base at the University of Sydney, he co-led the development of the Castlereagh Statement on AI and HE last year and also led the development of Cogniti, a platform that has won a huge

range of awards, allowing academics to develop teaching tools using AI. It is now used around the world.

In this session, we will dive into Danny's work, before moving quickly onto the challenge at hand – discussing outcomes from the morning's workshop on bridging the gulf between perceptions of AI and HE in the community compared to the sector. This will be fast paced, engaging and will aim to lock in audience engagement, to explore ways to begin to redefine the perception and love for the sector.

4:30 – 4:45 PM **Conference Wrap & Close**
Stephen Matchett, Future Campus

HE FEST

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