Thank you for inviting me to join you this morning.

I note that the title of my speech - decided upon what now seems like years ago - is “Building Strategic Partnerships and Global Collaborations to strengthen University performance”.

Well….. let’s just say I got side-tracked along the way by the goings on in Canberra ………………………..

So let me give you the back story…………………

First, I am very pleased to have this opportunity to speak with you, and in fact this is the first speech in my new role as Chief Executive of the Group of Eight Universities.

I joined the Go8 in late January, and as all of you would be aware, walked straight into the middle of the intense (and I hope you recognise that intense is a euphemism) fee deregulation debate.

Dare I say that I had hoped it would have been signed sealed and delivered well in advance of my arrival!

As a result of that not occurring, the past four months have been as much a baptism of fire, as a change of job.

And to be frank.. we haven’t yet come up for air as the debate continues, albeit that the result that our sector so needs, and wants, is politically out of reach because of the current Senate construct.

On the bright side - and we do surely need to find just one positive out of these funding challenges……

……it appears that regardless of its failure to deliver us the long term sustainable funding that we need;

……funding that would enable us to continue to give our quality students a quality education, and give the nation quality research;

……..the funding debate is definitely, and at last, focussing the minds of the community on the higher education sector.

A national “Essential Media” poll in mid-May showed that 73 per cent of the community thought the Government should better fund Universities.
The role of each and every one of us here today, is to now ensure we build on that, that we can better illustrate for the community....

...... and importantly better lobby the community, on exactly why our institutions need more adequate funding, and explain that funding’s value to every Australian every single day.

It does still surprise me after almost 15 years in the sector that so little is made of the fact that Universities affect every Australian, every day.

You don’t have to attend a University to benefit from university education and research. The whole community benefits.

I have found that stating the whole community benefits from Universities can still provide a light bulb moment for people who have simply never ever considered where universities fit in the scheme of their busy every-day life.

Think of our massive impact - the doctors, scientists, dentists, paramedics, nurses, pharmacists, lawyers, accountants, architects, engineers, teachers and, physiotherapists to name but a few of the professions we educate.

They care for us and our children, enable our homes, offices and roads to be designed and built safely, design and build cars and aeroplanes, mine our nation’s wealth, enable us to benefit from telecommunication technologies.

The list is endless... and I haven’t yet touched on what our research provides.

That is just the education component.

And it is a list that really matters to the Go8 given that, as a few examples, we educate:

62% of Australia’s doctors and vets

65% of dentists

62% of process and resources engineers

These professions are essential for our personal and national advancement, some even for our very survival.

They are all a product of a higher education system we must protect at all costs.

If we want to attract quality students and deliver quality graduates and, deliver tomorrow’s leaders, then protecting our Universities is worth fighting hard for.

Everything you are speaking about during these valuable two days here in Brisbane is at risk if the funding for that protection cannot be sourced.

Without the right funding what we have here at this conference is more of a wish list than a working plan for the future.
Every teaching and research advancement that we hold dear will, more likely than not, be unable to be delivered as we would wish.

The name of this conference EduTech has - at its heart - ways to improve the student experience, and to increase quality within Universities by utilising exciting technological advancements.

We are, each in our own way, speaking here about what the future needs to be, and, willing it to be the best that it can be.

To do less is to let out sector down.

... just from today’s program we have presentations on the universities of tomorrow, leveraging data, using technological change to shift enduring habits, balancing digital and face-to-face teaching.

All need passion. All need commitment. All need determination. But importantly all need to be properly funded or no amount of passion, commitment or determination will work.

This includes the welcome technological advances in teaching on our campuses that formed the basis for Shirley’s presentation just now, to further advancing MOOCS, to the important working relationships we can build globally with other universities, our strategic alliances.

I say that because the thread that runs through everything attached to this funding situation, and to our global standing and global relationships, is quality.

When quality cannot be maintained or nurtured and improved, the scenarios ahead for us are difficult, and in so many ways.

The biggest funding issue for our sector is the analogy of the boiling frog. The heat just keeps getting turned up and there is no obvious response noted from us.

Funding damage, even dire funding damage, will not close a University.

We will keep on keeping on. There is no headline response to ensure a political rethink. On the surface all looks deceptively fine.

No abandoned campuses with emotive tumbleweed vision for the television cameras.

No hundreds of employees pouring from the gates as a final factory siren sounds and making tearful statements about large job losses and the death of a local community.

No campaign of distraught parents or parade of local shop keepers bemoaning the loss of revenue from us.

Our plight is not visible to the harsh spotlight of media, nor stark enough to engender political retreat.

But it can, unfortunately, negatively impact far more people both directly and indirectly.

I have explained this to every politician I have met with in Canberra.
The effect on us is a slow burn. It is a slow burn made up of a multitude of compromises that we should, and do, find unacceptable because we value quality so much.

To save money we face larger class sizes, and fewer course offerings. This will affect both the quality of the student experience and results.

We face less funds and facilities for research in a nation that relies on Universities to carry out much of its research activity.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that universities perform over a quarter of all R&D (28%), compared to an average of 18% across the OECD.

However, this varies by field: just over half of all medical and health research is done by universities, and they receive two thirds of Commonwealth expenditure on research (67%).

If the current attitude to funding continues, it will mean less quality research for Australia to be proud of, and for Australians, and the world, to benefit from.

When you consider the long list of medical advancements, and the life-saving University research outcomes that we have all benefited from just in the past decade or so, you see starkly how illogical the current funding debate is.

Again the list is endless but here are some research examples:

- Researchers at the University of New South Wales created a new type of contact lens that allowed the transmission of oxygen and fluid through to the eye, preventing the development of problems that could occur with the use of previous types of lenses, such as corneal swelling, redness, thinning, inflammation and infection. Quite apart from the health benefits, sales over the last 14 years have exceeded US $20bn;

- Ground-breaking research by Pr Ian Fraser at the University of Queensland led to the development of Gardasil, a vaccine for the prevention of cervical cancer and other cancers caused by the HPV virus;

- Researchers from Monash University, have developed green storm water treatment and harvesting technologies to make better use of urban run-off rainwater, with over 10,000 ‘rain gardens’ created in Melbourne alone to protect the Yarra River catchment.

And we will only keep Australia at the forefront of discovery - keep driving improvements to the social and economic wellbeing of its citizens - provided politicians and the public understand how critical it is to nurture and support the talent we have in this country.

Australia has a proud history of inquiry and discovery, producing such Nobel Laureates as Peter Doherty, who discovered how the immune system recognises virus-infected cells;

Howard Florey, recognised for his work on penicillin; and

Elizabeth Blackburn - who discovered the role of telomeres in cell aging.
And many university researchers strive to continue this legacy into the future through projects with the potential to transform all of our lives.

To name just a few examples:

- Researchers at Monash University have used video games to demonstrate differences in the part of the brain involved in moral decision making in people engaging in acts of violence that they consider to be justified, such as in war. They hope to use these discoveries to identify how people become desensitised to violence;

- A simple blood test that could be used to detect early onset of Alzheimer’s disease has been developed by researchers at The University of Melbourne. This is an important breakthrough for a disease which can start to develop two decades before the onset of dementia, and which is estimated by Alzheimer’s Australia to affect 900,000 people in this country by 2050;

- A breakthrough in quantum computing technology by researchers at the Australian National University, providing an important step towards the development of unbreakable encryption for online transactions, an important tool in the battle against online fraud and identify theft which is estimated to have impacted over 772,000 people in Australia over the last 12 months.

The question has to be, are our politicians, whatever party they belong to, and the Senate cross benchers, actually saying that, despite the obvious value to the nation and the world......

....they would prefer our Universities to offer less quality education and research, and also less research impact?

After months of conversations with so many politicians, I genuinely can’t see that this is what they do want.

I would go so far as to say it is very much what they don’t want.

But it will be the result, regardless.

Call it an unintended consequence, call it a mistake, call it ill-thought through. Call it anything you like....... the outcome is the same.

Very much at risk are our world rankings, not immediately, but slowly and surely, if funding parameters don’t change.

It is world rankings that entice the international student market to Australian universities.

That is our selling point, that is our marketing tool, that is our proudly displayed certificate of quality.

These rankings are at risk from less or lesser quality research, because it is purely research quality and results that drive those world rankings.

Since 2012 almost $1 billion has been removed by both major parties from research funding programs.
A further $262 million over three years was removed from the Sustainable Research Excellence fund in last month’s Federal Budget.

Without world rankings for Australian Universities we know, absolutely know, that the highly competitive international student market will see many of the students who currently choose Australia going instead to the UK, the US or worse - New Zealand!

We have strong International relationships with overseas Universities, invaluable relationships, but that does not mean they are not waiting to pounce on our international student market if they detect weakness in our future world rankings.

The International student market is also Australia’s third largest export industry.

It is extremely important to the nation’s economy, yet we appear on the cusp of damaging it.

Rankings are lagged indicators – performance is based on past success.

Policy decisions made today take several years to become fully evident. The biggest concern is that by the time the problem is obvious, it will be too late to correct. It would then become a long-term project just to recover to today’s level of performance, and success would be by no means guaranteed.

But those of us here today will know we are just watching more of that slow burn.

And while I am passionate about the original title of my speech - the building of strategic partnerships and global collaborations - the harsh reality is we cannot continue as we have done in that area if our quality is to be affected.

We are judged on our quality.

It is who we are.

It signals what can be expected of entering a strategic alliance with us.

No-one wants a strategic alliance that is lop-sided or one-sided.

You need equality of purpose and you need equality of reputation and results for such alliances to work for the betterment of mutual performance.

No-one will carry us.

We stand and we fall by our reputation for quality.

During the past four plus months at the Go8 I have come to see that the most important strategic alliance Australian universities can pursue in 2015 is a strategic alliance with the Australian taxpayer.

That is our most important strategic alliance.
If we have taxpayers on board - if we can ensure the taxpayer understands our value to them - now and into the future, then we have a chance of extracting decent funding policies out of Canberra.

When you are a sector which does not change votes - when you are a sector that is not generally front of mind in the community - then you are, increasingly, at a political funding disadvantage.

That is simply fact.

So we need to ensure we look outwards and explain more comprehensively who we are and why we matter.

And we deserve to be listened to because we represent our students who are, after all, Australia’s future and our research which is the backbone of Australia’s economic and societal future.

Let’s share our passion for what we do so we can continue to deliver a high quality education and world esteemed research.

Thankyou