

CAMPUS MORNING MAIL

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In Conversation With: Ken Boal

The BHERT leader says universities are now placing a high value on their relationship with business and industry – but much more can be done

November 9 2017

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In the three years that Ken Boal has been President of the [Business Higher Education Round Table](#) he has witnessed what he calls a “serious shift” – from paying lip service to the idea of collaborating with business and industry, university leaders are now attaching a high value to the relationship.

“They are putting their money where their mouth is,” he says.

Universities are investing more in their industry engagement teams and are expending time and energy around developing working connections with the business-end of society – business itself.

“I talk to university leaders all the time and they understand the need for more and better collaboration,” says Boal. “They get it.”

Strong engagement

The facts bear out the strong engagement between universities and business. In 2015, according to the Department of Industry’s NSRC survey, Australian universities participated in over 10,000 partnerships and collaborations, with an invested value of A\$1.2 billion. They also registered nearly 3,000 inventions, executed over 1,500 licenses, and launched 55 new companies in the 3 years 2013-15.

And in terms of collaborations between industry and universities that produced commercial intellectual property, the 455 PCT Applications registered by Australian universities with companies from 2000 to 2015 means that Australia ranks with other innovative nations such as South Korea, Israel, and Japan, according to BHERT analysis, based on IP Australia research.

“But there is much more we can do,” says Boal.

“I think the major challenge is driving change in what are large, complex and – let’s face it – very bureaucratic organisations.

“They are driven by faculty, so it’s all very easy for the VCs and DVCs to say ‘this is what we are going to do’. But you have got to get the faculty – the research community, the academic teaching teams – on board as well.”

To do this, leaders have to “move the cheese” – to change the incentives.

“That probably would be my biggest ask to university leadership at the moment – to just keep adjusting your incentive programs, recognitions and promotions such that industry engagement is valued.”

Boal says that, in general, universities do want to respond to the needs of business and industry, but acknowledges that employers “aren’t always great at articulating what’s necessary”.

In his BHERT role, Boal and his colleagues have been working hard to improve communication and mutual understanding – and he says solid progress is being made.

“We’re also finding great examples of Australian businesses who are working hard to build engagement with universities. Australia’s largest company, the CBA, has over 70 separate initiatives with universities. These range from their \$15 million investment in quantum computing, through to their partnership to address cyber-security skills needs, and their graduate programs”

Knowledge-based economy

BHERT was established in 1990 to strengthen the relationship between business and industry and higher education, with the view that knowledge exchange and cross-sector collaboration could be “critical drivers for a knowledge-based economy”.

It was driven by the idea that business and industry could reap significant benefits from better access to the skills and knowledge of the tertiary sector.

Towards that end, it has worked to establish strategic partnerships in the development of programs that advance education, research and innovation.

It prides itself on being the only national organisation with members who are leaders in tertiary education, research institutions, business and industry.

As well as the BHERT role, Boal is vice president of [Cisco Australia and New Zealand](#). Since joining the company in 2004 he has led its public sector engagement with Australia’s federal, state and territory governments, defence, education and healthcare, and also growth and development in the private sector.

He has also had a senior role in steering the [Cisco Networking Academy](#), the company’s major education initiative – managing the team responsible for the delivery of an ICT training program designed to help to improve the career and education opportunities for some 20,000 Australians and New Zealanders each year.

The bigger picture

“Cisco gives its leaders a great platform to contribute,” he says. “The company has a networking pedigree, connecting things in the technology context. In a business environment, we often play a facilitation role, bringing together different players, and often challenging policy makers and government leaders around the massive changes in technology that have been taking place.”

Through this work he developed “a taste for the bigger picture”, spending much time in and around universities “understanding what they do and working out from a Cisco context how we could support them”.

He was happy to take on the BHERT position as it presented an opportunity to pursue a national agenda.

“That national agenda was one that I could support from a business side because I think that over the years there’s only been a relatively small number of advocates from the business community about what universities can do. I just wanted to add another voice and enlist a few others as well along the way.”

He says his views about universities “have definitely changed” in his three years at BHERT.

“In the early stages of my tenure I was of the ill-informed narrative that university-business collaboration was broken.

“There still is more work to do. But what I think has happened in the last three years is that the Government has done a really solid job of putting [business-university collaboration] further on the agenda than ever before, thanks to the [National Innovation and Science Agenda](#).”

Positive about engagement

This, he says, has helped to encourage higher education leaders’ new ‘pivot’ towards business-industry, which in turn has become more positive about engagement with universities.

“There have been some good signs on the business side but I think there’s more to do, because there still exists the stereotype that universities are slow, bureaucratic, and difficult to do business with – but I think that view now is more the minority than the majority.”

One thing Boal would like to see from universities is a more formal recognition of and encouragement for those academics who do engage with business-industry.

“I’d love to see just as fierce a competition around engagement with industry metrics as the [ERA](#) research metrics. That would also inform industry that these are the universities that are doing it well. Over several years that would drive the business community towards those doing it well.”

It is important, says Boal, for business leaders to think about universities in the correct context.

“I like how [University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor] [Michael Spence](#) puts it: universities won’t write you an app. Innovation that can be done in your garage is best left to others.

“If you want more serious, deeper, differentiated and sustainable innovation that’s where a university steps up to the challenge. Many in business are still focused too much on short-term projects and collaborations.”

Right tool for the right task

“Collaborations work best when they are targeted to more medium and longer term research initiatives,” he says.

“It’s about using the right tool for the right task. It’s about complementing your internal and your other external partnerships with what universities bring to the table.”

Many companies in Australia are working successfully with universities on ‘product’ research and development. But if a company doesn’t have ‘pure product’ – if, for example, it is engaged in a particular kind of ‘knowledge work’ – it might struggle to know or see what value could be derived from a collaboration “outside of just fuel me great talent with graduates and postgraduates”.

“That’s where there’s additional opportunity for collaboration, moving beyond R&D into the multi-disciplinary capacity that universities bring to the table. Not enough firms have cottoned-on to that capability, and there’s another chance for universities to help them discover it.”

Mobility challenge

There is, says Boal, a “mobility challenge” – which is making sure that researchers working in industry can easily move back into university research positions, and to have formal recognition of their industry work.

“In Australia, PhDs are regarded as an academic accreditation, of little use for industry. Here, 28 per cent of PhDs work in business, and 72 per cent in universities or research institutions – in Canada, 60 per cent of PhDs work in companies. We’re missing an opportunity to use our smartest people on business challenges.”

While there are some government programs aimed at addressing this issue, on the whole they are lacking in scale, says Boal.

Among other strategies, BHERT has been lobbying the [Ferris/Finkel/Fraser R&D Tax Incentive Review](#) to create incentives for boosting the number of researchers working in business and industry. It would be, he says, a cost-effective and powerful way “to get great talent into your firm; to get fresh thinking and to bring relevant and multi-disciplinary expertise to the table”.

Boal says that, in general, universities do want to respond to the needs of employers “but employers aren’t always great at articulating what’s necessary”.

As the digital revolution continues its wave of disruption, universities need to play several roles – “as sources of innovation and IP, talent managers and hubs of collaboration”.

The challenge to universities is to educate future workers to be prepared to innovate and thrive in a digital world, while also helping industry to navigate the digital transformation. Rather than being standalone institutions, they need to become “active and important participants in the digital ecosystem” through collaborations and partnerships.

“We still need their disciplinary knowledge – those are table stakes – but what we have to add to that is providing a new wave of professional work skills for the next 50 years.”

Necessary graduate attributes

Team work, collaboration, problem solving and critical thinking will all be necessary graduate attributes, says Boal.

“There is a need for a more coordinated skilling of Australia, and if we were able to orchestrate and tap into the major employer and industry groups there would already be a lot of content out there around what employers are looking for and what they need.”

To date, he says, universities have not suffered the same kind of digital disruption that is sweeping the modern economy.

“Universities are starting to experience it, but it’s still a little bit the smaller ripples before what could be the major tsunami of change.

“Whether that’s in the next five, 10, 15 or 20 years we don’t know, but it will come. Are universities evolving fast enough?”

“I’m seeing a lot of innovation, there’s no doubt about it. The student experience has evolved and the use of digital tools and platforms is quite extensive.

“But is it end-to-end? Is it truly interconnected with the broader eco-system?”

“I don’t think it’s anywhere near yet. I think there’s a lot more scope.

“This is about university leadership putting digital not as a nuisance or an inconvenience, but actually as a key pillar of their organisational strategy.

“That is where business and government are moving, putting digital at the heart and using it to modernise every part of the organisation and customer experience.”