Don Zoellner
Pro Vice-Chancellor, CDU

01 Don Zoellner on: his journey with education in the Northern Territory

I’d have never envisaged as a year 9 science teacher at Nightcliff High School in 1974 popping out with the grand title of Pro Vice-Chancellor at a University. My personal journey to and through tertiary education has probably been somewhat reflective of what’s actually happened in the policy space - starting with not much and working your way through to build something. It’s what I like about the Territory. Here I was, a country boy from Ohio able to lob into this place and take advantage of or be part of exposure on the national scene and Territory scene that wouldn’t have come about had I not been involved with the development of tertiary education in the Territory. It’s just been a marvellous journey.

02 Don Zoellner on: the opening of Darwin Community College and Cyclone Tracy 1974

I was in Darwin in 1974 for the opening of the Community College. There was royalty involved. It was quite a big deal. There were only a few buildings. I think the total spend was about $3M, but they were old dollars. It was quite a momentous occasion. I wasn’t physically here for Tracy, because Christmas time is when school teachers take their holidays. I lost everything I had. It was in a house out at Tiwi. I wasn’t due to come back after the cyclone but in fact when they reopened the schools in late January early and February kids appeared from everywhere. They weren’t really aware we were here so being a single person they were on the phone and said “come back to Darwin and we’ll put you on the Patrice” which was a decommissioned, allegedly a cruise liner. It was pretty basic. So we lived for about 2 months hanging off the end of Stokes Hill Wharf.

03 Don Zoellner on: the battle for control of educational policy in the 1970s and 1980s

Prior to 1979, public policy around higher education and training was being run by the Darwin Community College Council. The first Chief Minister, Paul Everingham, actually commissioned a review – and these are my words not his – into the rebels at the Darwin Community College who were fighting the Northern Territory Government’s will. Even though there was no-one in that Cabinet who had a university degree, including Everingham, they still believed that the Territory would only develop if it had its own university. So they fervently believed in the concept. It was a battle about political control and who would at the end of the day have the say.

The personalities involved were quite strong people, and they got into some very big arguments. They all had slightly different views about what should happen and how it
should happen, but all of them agreed that it should be a university at the end. It was about how you would do that.

04 Don Zoellner on: NTG versus Commonwealth on getting a university for the Territory

The Northern Territory Government rightly believed that Territorians should be funded from the national sources for university education for that was the policy. The Commonwealth said it’s cheaper for us to put them on a plane and send them south because the numbers didn’t stack up in their view. Certainly the desire of the local population as expressed to me by the parents when I was at the high school was that they wanted to stay in Darwin, and they wanted their kids to be able to stay in Darwin. Many of them didn’t actually do that, but they wanted the option.

But over time, more and more came to stay. In fact one of the great furphies around the Northern Territory University and its predecessors is that it didn’t attract many students to stay in the Territory. The statistics don’t show that at all. Year 12 students were finishing in Territory schools and the bulk of them were actually staying and attending NTU in its various incarnations.

05 Don Zoellner on: becoming Executive Director of Centralian College in 2002 after being Principal at Alice Springs High School

I then went across to be the Executive Director at Centralian College in late 2000 [heading says 2002?]. Centralian College was one of those unique dual sector things that only the Territory has done well in that it was a combined senior secondary years 11 and 12 with what was then called the TAFE offerings. It was unique in the nation.

06 Don Zoellner on: the merger to form CDU

Centralian College Council after quite a large gathering of people at Jabiru agreed to willingly go along with a merger. I was always a great believer in Centralian College joining with CDU because we could see – by we I mean the Centralian College Council – that it was unlikely that that a standalone organisation would survive financially a decade into the future. The Centralian College experience was one of saying ‘this is where our future lies, and this is a way that we can actually get a better offering into the town’. The goal of improving the intellectual capital of the Northern Territory and Alice Springs in particular I think was wildly successfully achieved with the amalgamation.

I was very involved with the merger of Centralian College and Northern Territory University. There were some very crucial sensitivities that needed to be managed. Knowing that the support of government was there was also crucial. You could ring up senior people - and they were supporting the project - so stuff that could have been difficult often wasn’t, or ways were found to make things work.
07 Don Zoellner on: Vice-Chancellor Ken McKinnon

In running the amalgamation, and the creation of CDU, Ken McKinnon played a really vital role. McKinnon is just one of those rare breed of people who has been to lots of places, done lots of things, understands politics, always has a smile on his face even when he’s assassinating someone. He’s extraordinarily sensitive to political, bureaucratic sensitivities - not that he necessarily agrees with them – but he knows what the issues are and how to deal with them. I think he was actually quite an inspired choice because he was coming to establish the idea, the organisation that represented the idea, without trying to build his own empire around it, which is always the temptation of a senior leader that you build a power base. He had no need to do that. He was able to take good policy and ingrain that in the DNA of the organisation. Why he actually did it – I think it is because he has a belief in the nation and that Australian citizens are entitled to a similar level of services no matter where they live.

08 Don Zoellner on: Indigenous education

When I left Alice Springs High School we had about 450 students, 50% of whom were Indigenous. At Centralian College in 1992/93, you didn’t need 5 fingers to count how many Indigenous people were in years 11 and 12.

There were a number of us who worked together in Alice Springs to change that dynamic. There has been a steady progression, not rapid but steady, of Indigenous enrolments in higher education that have come about as part of a purposeful decision on the part of the university to engage with Indigenous students with the appointment particularly of Steve Larkin as Pro Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Leadership. That appointment of a Pro Vice-Chancellor was quite symbolic about the higher education space.

The University will look back over time and some of the work that has been done I think is unrecognised for the power and symbolism of what it does, particularly the work that Michael Christie and some of his team members have done around teaching from country. I think when they are looked back on they’ll be seen to be quite significant events.

09 Don Zoellner: reflections on the development of the university

There has to be a reflection on what used to be and what is. One of the major changes that I noticed is that the rhetoric – if you can believe the NT News – the rhetoric in the NT News is of a successful organisation. They’d like to anoint the current Vice-Chancellor as the person that did that. My view would be a bit broader – as would Barney’s I think – in that it is actually the end result of a series of good policy decisions that are producing the benefits that were actually envisaged by the Nan Gieses of the world and all those people in the late ... ... [missing words on recording]