

## **LAWRENCE (LAWRIE) WILLETT AO**

### **Citation for the conferral of Doctor of the University (*honoris causa*)**

It is a privilege to present to you and to this gathering, for the award of Doctor of the University (*honoris causa*), Mr Lawrie Willett AO.

Mr Willett made a very significant and distinguished contribution to the mission, development and advancement of Charles Sturt University as Chancellor and a member of its Council, serving in the role of Chancellor for 12 years from 2002 until his retirement on 2 December 2014.

Mr Willett was born in Brisbane, entering the Commonwealth Public Service in 1957 and working in various positions in Queensland before transferring to Canberra in 1963.

During the early years of his career he held a number of key positions in areas such as customs and excise, business and consumer affairs and industry and commerce, including more than three years with the Australian Embassy in Japan as Australia's senior customs representative in Asia (1971-1975), and membership of Australia's GAAT negotiating team in Geneva (1978-1979). He was Director-General of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Chairman of the National Health and Medical Research Council in 1983-84, and from 1985-1990 was Commissioner of both the Health Insurance Commission and the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, and Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth Superannuation Fund Investment Trust.

In the private sector, he served on many boards including as chair of Collyfarms Cotton (1987-1990) and Australian Hospital Care Ltd (1996-2001). He was Chair of Jupiters Ltd (1992-2004), Breakwater Island Ltd and the Gungahlin Development Authority.

He was National President of the Building Owners and Managers Association (now the Australian Property Council) and served as a director for Sunbeam Victa, By-Vest Advisors, the Indigenous Land Corporation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commercial Development Corporation, ANZ Managed Investments Ltd, ANZ Life Insurance Ltd, ANZ Trustees Ltd and TabCorp Pty Ltd. Despite his heavy involvement in the public and private sector arenas Mr Willett also gave his time to the community serving in an honorary capacity as Mayor of Gunning Shire Council, President of the Commonwealth Club and Chairman of Radford College in Canberra.

Of significance among his many achievements, Mr Willett was the key driver behind the establishment of the veterinary science discipline at Charles Sturt University following the release of the Frawley Report into veterinary services in 2003. As a farmer, he understood the significant challenges faced by people in rural and regional communities in accessing qualified veterinary services, and the risk to Australia's substantial animal export trades that could result from disease outbreaks in large herds. He championed a rural veterinary science program against stiff and sustained opposition from traditional providers wary of competition from a rural based school. The University gained approval to operate a new school and commenced enrolments in 2005. The success of the School was evidenced by the fact that 90% of the first graduating cohort of new veterinary scientists went into rural and regional practice after graduation, starting to reverse decades of graduates of traditional schools moving into major cities. The veterinary school is now considered to be one of the top veterinary programs in the country.

Mr Willett's drive to provide opportunity for rural and regional students was again sparked by his experience of the devastating effects of the shortage of dentists on the health outcomes of rural and regional Australians. With fewer than half the number of dentists per population in rural areas, and substantially higher rates of chronic disease, he became personally involved in Charles Sturt University's push to gain funding and approval to operate a new dental school to ensure rural young people had the same opportunities as all young people in Australia – rural young people who would go on to work in rural communities.

Shaking off the criticism of some city institutions that rural Australia could not mount a high quality dental program, let alone attract students to a rurally based program, the University was successful in gaining approval to operate a school and funding of \$65.1 million from the Howard Government. The dental school is now recognised as one of the highest quality, most demanding and technologically advanced dental and oral programs in the southern hemisphere.

He recognised that higher education was changing, with universities becoming multi-million dollar and multi-national corporations. While the governance structures had served the University well for its first decade, he recognised through his long experience as a Board Chair that the University's governance structures would need to be modernised if Charles Sturt University was to remain a strong and viable institution into the future.

Well before the Government promoted its National Governance Reforms for Higher Education, Mr Willett was moving to modernise the University Council. Over the 12 years of his term, he worked diligently to transform both the structure and the culture of the Council touching every aspect of the University's activities from strategy to delegations to policy and board composition. The Council he leaves in 2014 is one that is ready and able to meet the challenges over the next decade.

From a life of public service, Lawrie Willett AO determined to give back to the rural communities from whence he came, and where he found meaning and purpose in his life. His contribution to Charles Sturt University was profound, his legacy found not just in the minute papers of the Council but in the myriad of professionals who now staff the hospitals, health and veterinary clinics, businesses and police services around rural Australia, the nation and the world.

Over the period of his Chancellorship, the University grew to become the largest provider of higher education in regional Australia. By 2014, the University was enrolling 12,000 more students than the next largest regional university, and three times more students than the three smallest regional universities combined.

Mr Willett witnessed a building program that is unprecedented in the regional higher education sector, with new veterinary, pharmacy and dentistry programs, new community dental and allied health clinics across multiple regional locations, and major new research and teaching facilities such as the National Life Sciences Hub.

I now present Mr Lawrie Willett AO, a man whose passion for our regions is legendary and who has dedicated his life, in the words of Captain Charles Napier Sturt, to 'the public good' as an outspoken advocate for the advancement of the creative, innovative and economic potential of rural Australians.

**Dated this third Day of December Two Thousand and Fourteen**