La Trobe 2 Kms from where I lived. It was 1967 - about 500 other students, three buildings and an abundance of academics confronted each of us.

Don and Gary were there and were amongst a most unusual collection of people - David Morgan, Bill Kelty, Tony Sheehan, Philippe Mora, Rod Bishop, Michael Delaney were amongst those who went onto interesting lives and careers. We all knew Sir Archibald Glenn and David Myers.

Many of those enrolling at La Trobe in 1967 were the first from their family to attend a University.

La Trobe took unusual steps to give us a sense of connection and support. Academics were accessible and personable. Glenn College provided a setting but the small number of students and their characteristics and ambitions were more important.

This was a time of bubbling ferment in Universities and elsewhere.

Often study seemed to some, including me, a chore to be fitted around other aspects of University life and a general questioning of how things were done in Australia.

Discussion and debate of the authority of the state and its institutions, the status of women, freedom from various previously accepted constraints (sexual mainly) and, of course, the Vietnam War represented a huge contrast to what seemed like the almost monastic life of school. Universities were more than the setting for the debates. Academics and others contributed passionately at times and spoke with a clear voice.

Most of us survived the experience although there were a few sad casualties.

Universities seem now a foreign land.

Determined in their focus on professional preparation for most, and struggling to be heard by the general community when infrequently their leaders try to explain that Universities serve other important purposes in our democratic society.

Universities, and the scholars and intellectuals they comprise, are indeed part of our democracies self protection mechanism against cant and abuse of authority.

Their research output is essential to our economies future and our shared prosperity.

They transmit from one generation to the next an understanding of our cultural heritage and values and our sense of national identity.

If I could change one thing, it would be to find a means of getting these other messages across. The absence of this explanation is what makes possible the vandalism of those who propose a future for Universities defined only by the economic benefit they impart to students and how much students should pay for it.

So I am worried about the future ahead for Universities as anchors of our national life and democracy. The dimming understanding in the broader community of their broad roles, the lost without translation of much scholarly work, the timid approach to the issues of our time - all set against the collapse of the quality media and the revolution to come from telecommunications and IT - are together a large mountain to climb.

I'm grateful for my start on a long journey at La Trobe. I encourage the University to speak more convincingly to our community about what it offers to Australia and its people over the years ahead.

The leadership of the University is up for this but needs support from the whole University community. They have mine. Thank you.