



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

# Sydney Policy Lab Strategy 2024-2027



## Ngyini ngalawangun mari budyari Gadinurada

**We meet together on the  
very beautiful Gadi Country.**

The Sydney Policy Lab acknowledges the generations upon generations of traditional custodians that have held responsibilities for Country, “custodian-ing” it from one generation to the next. We acknowledge the cultural protocols of protecting and holding knowledges that have sustained culture and Country for over 60,000 years.

Based in Sydney, we acknowledge the Gadigal Elders, past and present, and the beautiful Gadi Country where we work. We extend this acknowledgement to the Country, Elders and Ancestors of many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. We honour and respect the sovereignty of the many Nations where we live and work.

We are committed to working respectfully and authentically with First Peoples across these beautiful lands, waters and skies.



# From the director

## *November 2023*

This 2024–2027 strategy for the Sydney Policy Lab is about leadership for good.

Over the next four years we will provide a non-partisan space where communities and the academy come together to investigate and solve complex policy issues that face our world, to walk and work alongside our communities, and pave the future together.

We will connect with and learn from communities as we seek to tackle complex societal problems together. As a University of Sydney body, we will give new life to the idea of the university as a public institution engaged simultaneously in the pursuit of the truth and the life of our communities. We believe there is enormous potential in the idea of the university as a public polity that enables us to do several important things: critically reflect on our role so we can elevate our contributions to knowledge and society; understand and pursue innovation to increase human wellbeing; and engage in authentic and meaningful conversations with our communities to help shape their futures and ours. We see the Lab as part of an exciting project to create a new

public research and development (R&D) system for public policy.

This strategy has been developed in a two-stage process run over more than a year. I joined the Sydney Policy Lab as Director in August 2022 and over the following three months we engaged in almost 100 conversations with existing collaborators as we sought to refine our approach. The result was *Turning Deep Listening into a Critical Piece of Social Infrastructure: The Sydney Policy Lab and the Next Twelve Months*, launched in November 2022. We have tested this approach over the last year, gaining invaluable data, feedback and insights that now inform this strategy. We thank all who have so generously provided help: our Advisory Group, colleagues at the University of Sydney and other universities, as well as those in civil society, government and philanthropy.

The task now is to implement and learn. Please join us in this shared endeavour.



**Dr Kate Harrison Brennan**  
Director, Sydney Policy Lab

# The Sydney Policy Lab

A community-centred and multidisciplinary policy laboratory to develop and deliver policy solutions.

## *Our advisory group*



**Kirsten Andrews**  
Vice President,  
External Engagement,  
The University of Sydney



**Bernadette Black AM**  
Social Economic Ambassador,  
SEED; Founding Director and  
former CEO, Brave Foundation



**Lee Cooper**  
Founder,  
RadicalBox



**Robyn Holt**  
Design consultant;  
Co-Founder, Monocle Magazine



**Professor Jakelin Troy**  
Director, Indigenous Research,  
The University of Sydney



The Sydney Policy Lab was created by the University of Sydney to be a non-partisan space where communities and the academy can come together to investigate and solve complex policy issues that face our world. We walk and work alongside communities to really help deliver different kinds of desirable, feasible and viable policy solutions. The Sydney Policy Lab represents a powerful contribution by our communities and the university to the common good.

The Lab's prime focus is on and with community. It was created by people searching for practical answers to the question of how we can best arrange

our life together. Its work reflects this, building relationships between people from diverse backgrounds to encourage greater empathy and understanding, to drive the creation and implementation of community-led policies. In particular, we want to work with those who have been excluded from decision making, leadership and power.

We are neither a think tank, nor a consulting firm, but innovators of a new public R&D system that aims to engage communities and universities to generate genuine policy development – a movement gaining new impetus across the world.

# Great and *compounding* need

The case for the Sydney Policy Lab is clear.  
Australian policymaking is in trouble.

Egregious policy failures such as the Robodebt Scheme have stood out in recent times. But in so many areas – aged care, child care, environmental action and the ongoing and significant gaps in life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – policy failure has followed policy failure. The evidence is all around us. Ageing Australians are holding onto houses because they live in fear of a catastrophic health event. There are child care deserts. Australia’s environment is rapidly deteriorating. And Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, proportionally, are the most incarcerated people on the planet.

Why? Several answers suggest themselves.

Policy is becoming increasingly complex, fragmented, remote, abstract and difficult for people within policy systems and communities to understand. Policy making at present is all too often framed using language and concepts that exclude and stigmatise people, and



which hide deeper forms of inequality. This results in poor quality policy that is difficult to implement. In practice, policies quite often work against each other. Left to carry the burden of policy failures, communities can become cynical and resistant. Such communities have great capacity to challenge the status quo, form internal and external alliances, and lead solutions that meet their needs. Better approaches to policymaking can empower them significantly.

Australia's policy research and development systems simply haven't kept up with the times and are seriously underdeveloped. As a consequence, lasting policy successes are rare.

Implementation skills are lacking. Our hollowed out public service has lost much of its expertise and authority. There's a popular feeling that policymakers just can't get things done anymore. Too many good ideas often fail to make it beyond a press release. The public sector has lost out on both capabilities – the policy thinking and the implementation smarts.

There is too much emphasis on public relations, not enough on public policy.

For years, governments have turned to big consulting firms for answers, often at a huge financial cost, only to discover they are beset by many of the same problems and have a fundamental misalignment of purpose between private profit and public interest. Think tanks have also been used, but their ideas can at times be overly ideological and inadequately informed by the experiences and scholarly knowledge located within our communities.

Communities and universities must be part of the answer. The knowledge, expertise and understanding they collectively create can and should add significantly to Australia's policymaking capacity. Importantly, this policymaking offers a way for our communities and universities to truly connect to drive the changes required. Through policymaking, universities can also demonstrate how their value to democracy and our communities goes well beyond educating the next generation. Working with communities to develop better public policies can help universities demonstrate their timeless public worth.

At the Sydney Policy Lab, we're developing a model to do just that.

# Where we *begin*

The University of Sydney's ten-year strategy launched in August 2022 envisaged that by 2032, our university will be known for "the extraordinary power its world-class research and teaching has to transform people's lives, and for the pride it generates throughout our city, our state and our nation." The Sydney Policy Lab aims to make this vision a reality.

Since our establishment, the Sydney Policy Lab has demonstrated our approach works. We are grateful for deep relationships with civil society organisations and philanthropy, and proud of our past collaborative work including on the COVID-19 pandemic, with Multicultural NSW on the refugee youth policy initiative, and with the Australian government and disability community organisations on the principles for a National Disability Data Asset.

Over the past 12 months the Lab has tested its November 2022 strategy, with four major findings.

- Significant potential exists for greater community-university engagement.
- People recognise the need for more community-led policy development, but the right methodologies and necessary infrastructure still need to be established.
- Governments need to recognise that universities, as major public institutions, have a central role to play in community-centred engagement at the national, state, regional and local level. Their importance in contributing to place-based policy is immense.
- Genuine policy development is rare in Australia, and developing policy that combines community leadership and rigorous scholarly research that is informed by community-centred and Indigenous methodologies is rarer still.





The Sydney Policy Lab has set out to fill the vital role of intermediary between the university and communities. We are well positioned to elevate existing community-university initiatives and to contribute to the scale of these

approaches. This makes us a critical piece of national, state, regional and local infrastructure in ways that differ from traditional university research centres, think tanks, and consulting bodies.

# *Our vision*



# Action over the next four years

Within the next five years we want the Sydney Policy Lab to be regarded as a critical piece of social infrastructure, initiating, contributing to and sustaining the sorts of relationships, conversations and collaborations required to address the challenges of our times, leverage opportunities, distil new methods and provide policy solutions that endure.

We see the Lab making a leading contribution to the university by enabling it to play a positive role in the life of the community.

We see the Lab reclaiming the rightful place of universities in Australia's public R&D system for policy solutions.

We see our community-led, exploratory and applied approach to policy development producing robust policy solutions that will endure.

We see our collective methods, insights and collaborative successes being distilled and adopted by others for wider public benefit.

We see our communities and the university's alumni, staff and leaders benefitting from the public training we collectively offer.

By the end of 2027 we want the Lab to be known for:

- helping transform the communities we work with while transforming ourselves
- kick-starting the development of a new R&D system for public policy, led by universities
- making a remarkable contribution across many communities and fields by reshaping the ways in which policy is developed.

We will achieve this because:

- we bring together diverse expertise and are a trusted partner
- we engage academic leadership from across the university
- we share our methods, insights and collaborative successes with others
- we connect strongly with policy partners and philanthropists in Australia and across the world.

For each of these actions, we have identified the design questions that will drive our curiosity, action and learning.

# Helping transform the communities we work with while transforming ourselves

We live in a time of rapid change and increasing polarisation. How should the university respond, remain relevant and be part of the solution?

At the Sydney Policy Lab, we believe the answer involves reconnecting universities with their long tradition as distinctive communities, dedicated to the pursuit of the common good. We want to move beyond the current dominant idea of universities as transactional institutions for providing qualifications and doing research. We don't believe universities should have to choose between contemplation and applied civic ends. We see them instead as places that embody and champion the democratic civic virtues, broadly understood. By simultaneously valuing the truth, promoting free discussion,

advancing knowledge, conducting research and developing virtuous citizens, universities can help the world address the acute problems it faces, achieving progress without unnecessary conflict. Universities are attached to places and people and have a crucial role to play in elevating the lives of those we serve.

In other words, we believe universities have a civic purpose to form society, individuals and communities.

Doing this requires universities to engage with communities in new ways

and develop stronger relationships with them. A certain degree of rethinking university structures will be needed.

As we do this, we recognise we are located on lands that are home to the oldest continuous cultures in the world. We will respect this cultural knowledge and custodianship and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to embed Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing into how we teach, research and relate to each other. We will hold ourselves accountable, and be accountable to our communities, for the actions we take.

The Lab will contribute to a network of community engagement for multidisciplinary policy development, making the most of our university's existing campuses and relationships in our city, regional and rural campuses. This will include our campuses located in Camperdown, Westmead, Lismore, Broken Hill (across the three distributed campuses in far west, north and southwest NSW), Narrabri, Dubbo and Orange. It will give a preeminent place to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, academics and staff.

In time, we will also create new networks that invite a flow of people and ideas between the university and its overlapping communities. We are grateful to be invited into these communities and be able to engage and learn with and from them.

## What we will test

How might we:

- build relationships between communities and the University of Sydney?
- ensure community leadership in the work that we do?
- not only contribute to communities, but connect with and learn with and from them?
- build meaningful and sustainable collaborations with colleagues who work in different geographic locations in our or other universities?
- enable communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to hold us to account for our actions?

# Kick-starting the development of a new R&D system for public policy, led by universities

The idea that private sector research and development systems perform better than public ones is a myth. We contend that communities and universities have a crucial role to play in a renewed public R&D system.

Communities have a depth and breadth of knowledge to contribute. As civic institutions which exist to promote the public good, universities are innately suited to the task of public policy research. Collectively, communities and universities are not plagued by the misalignment of interests often generated by the commercial and political imperatives of consulting firms and think tanks. We are open to new ways of thinking about the public good and how to achieve it. This is especially the case for communities and the Sydney Policy Lab.

We know communities have their own histories and power relations. These relations necessitate policy making which is deeper and more creative. We must move beyond superficial

consultation toward genuine and iterative engagements which ensure knowledge is layered, tested and validated.

A crucial part of R&D is working out what really matters to people – something that requires us to make our engagement processes accessible, comfortable and positive. As researchers, we will promote engagement by employing creative methods, using a wider range of data and valuing storytelling in particular. We will not only collect stories, but find their points of intersection and develop or reframe collective narratives around policy.

Such an approach has the potential to develop relationships rather than simply extract knowledge, foster agreement, build consensus and aid implementation. When people solve problems together, they are more likely to adopt agreed solutions and show the patience needed to get results.

As we champion the creation of a new

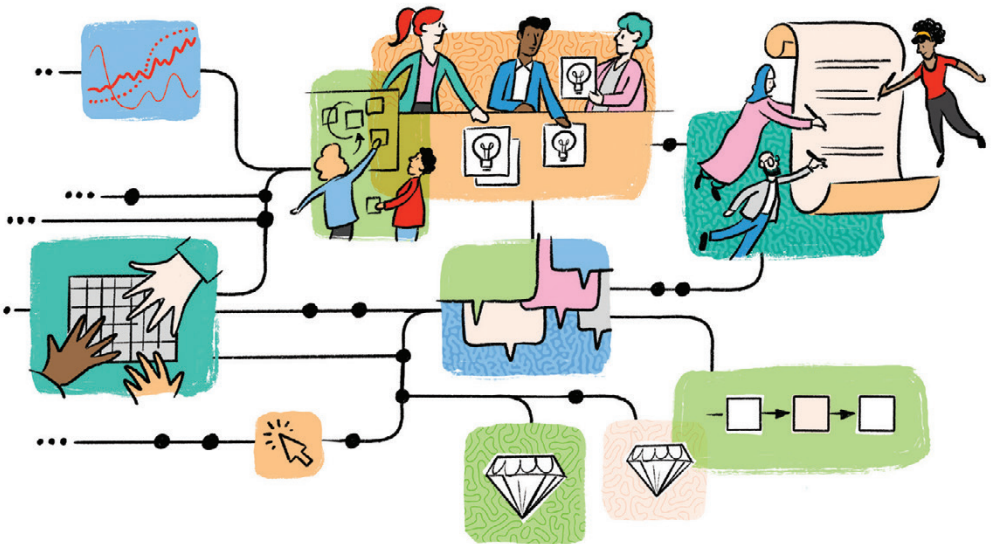
system of public policy R&D, we will continue to think deeply about our role in the development of policy and the broader systems at work, and the implications this has for communities.

We will be methodical about the way we conduct and apply research, based on what is acceptable for communities and will work for them. We will also make our new collective knowledge, findings and recommendations accessible to others, sharing insights, providing training and encouraging reflection on how they might be applied and adapted to enable translation and scalability. The goal of our public policy work will always be to produce the widest possible common good.

## What we will test

How might we:

- distil key insights from policies developed and implemented in case studies?
- steward these case studies for public benefit and develop a methodology to enable adaptation?
- provide education and training based on the insights from case studies and their adaptation, enabling reflection on possible applications?



# Making a remarkable contribution across many communities and fields by reshaping the ways in which policy is developed



We aim to influence policy development broadly and reshape the conventional ways in which it is done.

We seek to become a true policy laboratory – a space that brings together diverse perspectives and community-centred and experimental methodologies to formulate, test and apply our policy hypotheses to real-world situations. We will employ new methods to create sustained forms of civic dialogue. The approaches now commonly used are clearly not working well enough.

We will stand out for the collaborative and community-led nature of our work, for being a place that welcomes those

who tend to be excluded and for fulfilling our obligations to those with whom we work.

We will collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and work authentically and respectfully with them. Our work will be informed by the rich forms of knowledge that have governed this land for thousands of years and will take into account the everyday and historically-derived power imbalances in our society.

Our policy work will continue to focus on the issues of greatest immediate and long-term consequence for our communities where we can make a distinctive contribution.



We will be unafraid to address the most pressing and politically-contested issues of the day, but we will do so in ways that focus on what really matters. We will address the full complexity of these problems and aim to provide clear, timely solutions that are practical to adopt.

Our policy work will eschew fixed, narrow categories and will search always for interconnections and dependencies, mindful that the solution to one set of problems is often part of the solution to another. The climate, economy, care and workers' rights, for example, are all connected.

We will avoid policy quick fixes. At the Sydney Policy Lab, we are purposeful about the pace at which we work, taking the necessary time to understand the complexity and practical implications of everything we do and propose. We will work at the speed of trust we establish with communities, acknowledging past and current harms. We aim to produce considered solutions that actually work and believe the methods we employ are as important as the policies we jointly create.

We believe real progress is possible, even when addressing the most complex problems, but understand it requires sustained effort and adaptability to changing circumstances.

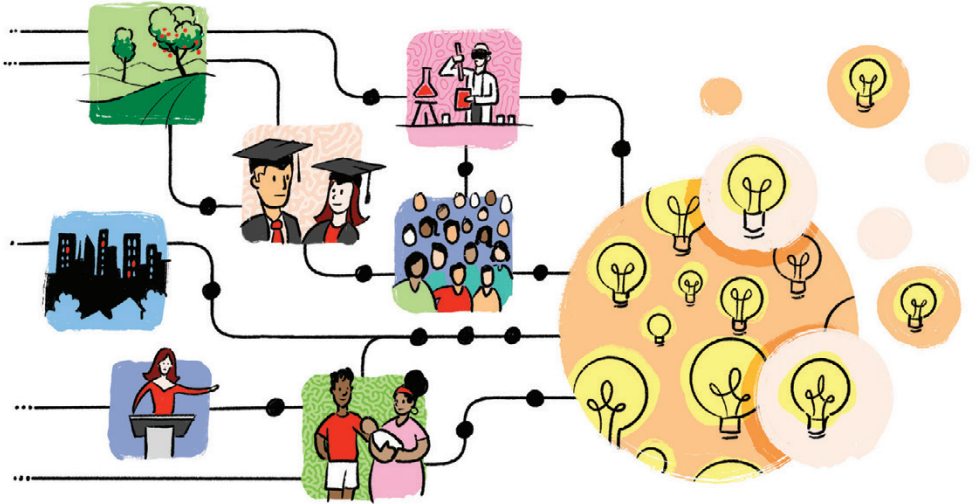
Developing smart-sounding policies is not enough. We will ensure our policies take communities with them because they are led by the community. Having collaboratively developed policies, we will follow through to gain public and government support so they can be implemented. Communications and government relations will be a necessary part of our brief, but it will not drive our work.

## What we will test

How might we:

- reshape the conventional ways in which policy (1) is developed to address complex challenges, (2) is community-led, (3) is inclusive and respectful of Indigenous knowledges, and (4) benefits from diverse expertise?
- equip communities and leaders to adapt policies to local and changing circumstances to ensure they are implemented?
- make our work practical, relevant and appealing for government?
- bring world-leading research, lived expertise and shared knowledge into the conversations that matter?
- communicate our policy successes in ways that are engaging and compelling?

# We bring together diverse expertise and are a trusted partner



We believe diverse expertise makes for better policy. This belief comes from our understanding of universities as communities of people striving to achieve the common good via free and respectful discussion.

We believe engaging across lines of difference in this way offers the best hope of progress. We therefore aim always to seek input from a diverse range of knowledge holders and experts inside and outside the university.

This knowledge and expertise includes both academic knowledge and lived experience. We treat all participants in our work with equal respect and understand the best results are achieved when those directly affected by new policies are involved in their creation.

As former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Michael Spence, put it, pursuing shared goals and aiming for the truth means “pursuing increasing levels of communication

and understanding,” “finding common ground with one another,” and showing a “desire to identify with some precision the points on which difference exists.” This is how our university trains people as democratic citizens – one of the Lab’s central objectives.

And once we have brought diverse individuals, communities and organisations together we use partnership and teamwork to deliver results. It’s the best way to solve complex problems and achieve sustainable solutions.

When we explore potential partnerships, we do so with respect and curiosity, seeking to define a shared sense of purpose and value, giving careful consideration to what is required of us as a public university. When we commit to a partnership, we do our utmost to ensure we can deliver. And when we complete a collaborative project, we seek to celebrate all contributions involved.

We will hold ourselves to high standards and hope that others – locally, nationally or internationally – will in turn look to us as a partner of choice.

## What we will test

How might we:

- build working models and methods that show how we can remould universities as highly-networked and inclusive communities?
- develop, share and refine an operating model for our work that captures why diverse knowledge, expertise and distinctive contributions matter and how this works in practice?
- continue to engage diverse knowledge and expertise for the benefit of our communities and elevate the Lab’s leadership and collaborative strategies?
- become partners of choice for communities, governments, not-for-profit organisations and businesses who want to address complex challenges for public benefit?

# We engage academic leadership from across the university

As a multidisciplinary institute at the University of Sydney, we are committed to broad engagement across the university. We are always curious about the research of colleagues and delight in the knowledge they create. Because big policy challenges are rarely addressed using the insights from single disciplines, we will always seek to build collaborations across community and disciplinary bounds. We will push the

bounds of what is expected, unafraid to take a novel approach to tackle persistent problems.

We will welcome the deep involvement of university scholars – in fact, our success depends upon it. The best academics are exemplars in practice as well as in thought, masters of education for the wider community and think deeply about the social good. The Lab will provide opportunities for academics to get involved in our policy work – providing them with the opportunity to ensure their input achieves practical results in the service of communities, and contributes towards their own academic career success.

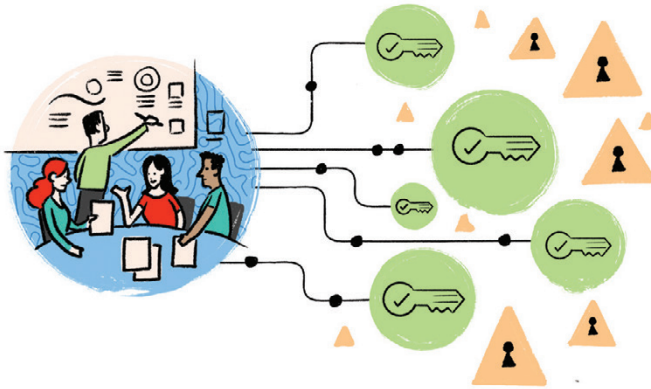
## What we will test

How might we:

- broaden the academic leadership of our work, support those academics who join with us and communicate the value of engaging with the Lab?
- engage with and help increase the multidisciplinary research culture of the university?
- build a healthy and strong collaborative economy?



# We share our methods, insights and collaborative successes with others



As a university policy laboratory, we are purposeful and disciplined about testing and developing our methods.

As in a scientific laboratory, the solutions we develop to one problem can be useful for solving different problems entirely. In the public policy realm this is especially important, as social problems have many causes. That's why we will always be open to the potential wider application of the methods and insights we develop, actively exploring their other uses. what other uses they may be put to. Our goal is to maximise our influence on public policy and society.

We will engage with leaders from the university and communities around the country to describe the benefits of inclusive, listening-based and

community-centred policymaking methodology. Its potential to bring about positive change is significant and worthy of effort.

## What we will test

How might we:

- strengthen our capacity to learn as we work?
- best capture our stories, document our work and methodologies, and encourage others to adapt and adopt these new approaches?
- develop public training programs to enable others to learn from our successes?

# We connect with policy partners and philanthropists here and across the world

To extend our reach and improve our effectiveness, we will engage in partnership and network building.

As part of this, we intend to establish a network of analogous labs in universities across Australia and overseas. Its aim will

be to build and strengthen relationships, explore issues of common interest, allow research projects to evolve organically, and promote the growth of community, academy, student and alumni connections that carry our ideas to the wider world.

## What we will test

How might we:

- partner with national and international networks of peers to learn, share ideas and extend the reach of our work?
- invite philanthropists to join our community-led, exploratory and applied work so we can help achieve our respective goals?

Through these partnerships and networks, we hope not only to learn from others but to increase the scale and extend the reach of our work, allowing us to tackle ever more complex policy problems. It will also give us access to broader sources of funding.

We will partner with government and non-government organisations alike to help achieve our respective visions, ensuring the voices of communities guide us in this work.

And we look forward to continuing to connect with philanthropists, whose risk capital greatly aids our work.



## *What is next?*

The Lab is getting on with its unique style of public policy work.

As we do, we will be seeking to become even more effective by refining our methods, focusing on the design questions in this document. Other suggestions for improvement will be warmly welcomed.

We won't get everything right, but we won't give up. We look forward to sharing what we learn with others in an open, fair and democratic fashion for the betterment of communities. And in doing so, we hope to re-energise Australia's public R&D system as well as

help reconnect Australia's universities, including the University of Sydney, with the people and communities we are honoured to serve.

## **How will we know we are making a difference?**

Success for the Sydney Policy Lab will be (1) whenever a community is flourishing as the result of a well-delivered policy solution we helped create, and (2) when the public has developed a new understanding of the important public purpose served by universities.

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University of Sydney graffiti  
tunnel photograph: Irenaeus Herok  
Gadi photograph: Cornel Ozies  
Illustrations: Ben Crothers

With thanks to Dennis Glover