

OBITUARY

PROFESSOR ALAN D. GILBERT, AO (11 September 1944 – 27 July 2010)

Professor Alan Gilbert will be deeply mourned and sadly missed by many in the higher education sector across the world, not least by his colleagues here in Manchester.

His untimely death at the age of 65 comes less than a month after he retired as our inaugural President and Vice-Chancellor, a post he had held since the University was established on 1 October 2004.

Alan will be remembered as a distinguished academic, a transformational leader, a highly-effective defender of the value and importance of universities and a passionate supporter of students. Everything he did was characterised by a fundamental commitment to the creation, application and transmission of knowledge through open, disciplined and rational inquiry for the enduring betterment of humankind and a passionate belief that universities must be a core and valued part of our societies.

His own academic career began with strong credentials. Born in Brisbane, he graduated with 1st class honours from the Australian National University in 1965 before completing a M.A. in History in 1967, also from ANU. He obtained a D.Phil in Modern History from the University of Oxford in 1973. Before taking on management responsibilities as Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) at the University of New South Wales in 1988, Alan had been a prominent teacher and history researcher, publishing widely on British and Australian themes, with a particular interest in the secularisation of modern Western culture. He was one of the four General Editors of *Australians: A Historical Library*, an 11 volume history of Australia prepared for the 1988 Bicentenary. Throughout his later career in leadership in higher education he retained a real passion for scholarship and discovery and a true understanding of the values of those activities for the wider society.

Alan served as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Tasmania (1991 to 1995), and as Vice-Chancellor and Principal of The University of Melbourne (1996 to 2004). This made him the ideal candidate to lead Britain's newest and largest university. Alan developed the vision for our University, the *Manchester 2015 Agenda*, which laid out a bold and ambitious plan and attracted widespread support and allegiance.

Alan's clarity of vision and inspirational leadership oversaw the physical transformation of our campus with more than £600 million of investment in its buildings and encouraged the University to mobilise the knowledge, talents and achievements of our community in the service of humanity. Notable successes included a dramatic improvement in our research performance, as recorded in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, and the establishment of new cross-disciplinary research institutes addressing a range of social and environmental challenges. Under Alan's leadership, we have seen the introduction of the Manchester Leadership Programme, which allows students to engage in supervised voluntary work, and the launch of a campus-wide initiative to transform and re-personalise the undergraduate student experience.

Alan came to Manchester with a wealth of experience internationally, including initiation and inaugural chair of *Universitas 21*, a network of leading international research universities, membership of a Reference Group advising the Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training about a major reform agenda and he was a member of the UK Prime Minister's Science and Technology Council and a Commissioner in the UK Commission for Employment and Skills in 2007. Alan received a number of honorary doctorates and became an Officer of the Order of Australia in January 2008.

To those of us who worked closely with Alan, he was a truly inspirational leader, a man of huge intellect, with a remarkable ability to think differently, yet always effectively, about problems, challenges and opportunities. His honesty and integrity were beyond question – he always asked: “Is this the right thing to do? Is it fair and can we explain and defend our actions to others?” If the answer was ever no, he would argue for a different, if often more difficult approach. He was also a good friend, confidante and mentor, who always looked for the best for all of his staff, even when this was to his own disadvantage.

Conversations with Alan were always informed and interesting. He was widely read and impressively knowledgeable – fascinated by the nuances and gossip of British culture and keen to talk of his personal passions. He was a competitive runner, a very informed and enthusiastic cricket supporter and a fan of Chelsea Football Club, though there was regular banter with his colleagues who were of somewhat different persuasions.

Alan cared passionately about students, believing them to be the life-blood of universities and his speech, which would have been presented at our sixth Foundation Day later this year, was entitled: “*It's the students, stupid.*” He also vociferously defended the value and importance of freedom of enquiry and of speech, even when this meant confronting values and beliefs very different to our own, and at times courted controversy from those less open-minded than himself.

An endearing memory for many of his colleagues will be Alan's great kindness and compassion for others, while his sense of humour and quick wit meant that he was always great company. He had a huge impact on so many people and will be deeply missed.

Professor Gilbert is survived by his wife, Ingrid, and their two daughters, Michelle and Fiona.

*Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell
President and Vice-Chancellor
The University of Manchester
29 July 2010*