



# WORLDWIDE UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

**Professor John Hearn**, Executive Director of WUN and Chairman of the Australia-Africa Universities Network, discusses the prolific threats that continue to plague public health and outlines initiatives in place that promote education and prevention

## Could you first provide a brief introduction to the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) with a particular focus on its public health remit?

WUN is a world-leading research university network, tackling global challenges through international collaboration and developing international research talent. WUN's membership includes 18 partner universities from 10 countries on five continents. The network collaborates with over 200 other institutions in over 90 active research programmes, engages over 2,000 researchers and students, and works with government, international agencies and industry. WUN exists to find solutions to some of society's most significant challenges and to improve quality of life.

Public Health is one of WUN's four key thematic areas (known as Global Challenges). WUN draws upon the strength of its members to address issues surrounding non communicable diseases (NCDs), with an emphasis on obesity, heart disease and diabetes. In doing so, WUN emphasises a life-course approach to opportunities for addressing NCDs, especially in low- and middle-income countries and transitioning populations, but also in developed societies where there are social disparities in risk. This focus is based on substantial evidence for the inextricable linkage between maternal, perinatal, infant and childhood factors, and adult lifestyle factors that accumulate and contribute to the risk of developing NCDs later in life.

## What are the key challenges facing public health today?

Among NCDs, the key challenges are in the plague of obesity, heart disease and diabetes, and ensuring these are combatted through lifestyle and a whole-of-life approaches. The costs of prevention dwarf the costs of treatment. Others would be smoking and cancer; again, lifestyle changes are probably the best interventions, but are not easy to achieve in any country.

With regard to infectious diseases, there are still huge challenges and debilitating conditions, including HIV/AIDS, insect-spread diseases and the coming wave of antibiotic resistant microbes, including tuberculosis, super bugs and even common infections that get out of control. The

responsible use of drugs, cleanliness and hygiene can go a long way toward prevention.

## Do you think sufficient work is underway to address these threats?

In brief, the answer is no. There are significant public health challenges that are accentuated by self harm in behaviour and reckless or thoughtless practice. Many of the diseases are most prevalent in countries that lack adequate public health, regulations or medicine. Moreover, these threats can only get worse where population increase outstrips access to healthcare and education.

## Could you give examples of some of the organisation's innovative programmes?

We have over ninety global interdisciplinary research groups, of which I will mention three. In Public Health, we are making a difference every day through our research into life course approaches to tackling NCDs, health literacy, inflammatory diseases and health systems managements, to name but a few. We are particularly proud that in 2011, the WUN Shanghai Declaration, which advocated early life interventions for addressing non-communicable diseases, was featured in the Lancet and subsequently adopted by the UN's 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Our aim is that the collaborative research catalysed through WUN reaches far beyond the lab and into the lives of those that need it most. It is through this kind of policy impact at the global level that we can best achieve these aims.

In other areas of WUN research, our global network of Critical Zone Observatories (in the UK, US and Australia) are constantly measuring the planet's vital signs of life in the critical area between bedrock and treetop. This crucial information feeds into environmental and food security research around the world. Our Networking Young Citizens project is informing governments and civil society of the best ways we can encourage disenfranchised youth to engage more effectively in the democratic process and political institutions through innovative means such as social media. Each of these ongoing programme areas are critical to making a difference to the environment, health and society of future generations.

## WUN's four Global Challenges

- Global Higher Education and Research
- Public Health
- Responding to Climate Change
- Understanding Cultures

### As a leading international higher education and research network, how does WUN work to develop the next generation of leaders?

We put high priority on the creation of opportunity and access to mobility for emerging researchers who work with our international teams. Global experience of research at an early career stage is transformative, and not easy to achieve, so we take the trouble to ensure that young leaders can find the time, embrace the opportunity and have important questions to pursue.

### How did you become involved with the organisation and which aspects of your role do you find most rewarding?

As Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International), I brought the University of Sydney into the network in 2007. We dived right in and profited greatly from network membership; I was sold on the value of WUN. As with anything in life, if you go out, play and contribute, you get benefits. If you sit in the stands and wait for the cargo plane to drop the benefits without the work, forget it. In 2009, I was appointed Executive Director of WUN. The role is endlessly challenging and fascinating, and includes facilitating global teams and programmes that can make a significant difference to many of the big issues facing society. Among the interesting dimensions are the leadership of brilliant people and teams without authoritative line management, the identification and fostering of great ideas with limited resources, and striving to implement a minimal but effective administration.

### Looking ahead to the next five to 10 years, what will be the Network's key foci?

In its first ten years of work, the network has established communities of researchers who are ready to work together, and a community of partners who commit to the concept of working together to achieve more than we could alone. The key foci in the next ten years are likely to build around our four broad areas of expertise, introduce new disciplines, technologies and cross-cutting programmes including big data, macroeconomics and regional programmes relating to China and Africa. The Network is essentially a global experiment in international cooperation, and a laboratory for international innovation. As in any laboratory and experiment, we learn and evolve as we develop, with urgency being an ingredient, as we cannot indulge in waste of time.

[www.wun.ac.uk](http://www.wun.ac.uk)



## INTERNATIONAL TIES

### Professor John Hearn describes the Network's links with ongoing global initiatives and the importance of its prolific partnerships

The network maintains careful focus so that its efforts are not diluted. Partnerships are carefully cultivated and the relevant knowledge base developed. WUN places great emphasis on fostering relationships where our applied research will have the greatest impact.

In focusing on our Global Challenge in Public Health, we have developed close links with the UN's Every Woman, Every Child initiative and the World Health Organization's Maternal & Child Health initiative, where we help to inform their policies on the critical role of gestational, neo-natal and adolescent health in laying the building blocks for a healthy life.

In Higher Education, we partner with the OECD, British Council and others as a knowledge partner and contribute to their fora and publications on issues ranging from access to education to global academic flows. For our emphasis on Responding to Climate Change and food security, we work with a range of agencies, and in Understanding Cultures, we liaise with governments and policy makers in areas such as migration, ageing and indigenous development.

Team work with international agencies, governments, business and NGOs is required, and we can and should do more in this regard if the knowledge gained is to translate into evidence-based policy options and practical benefit as we promise.

The OECD and UNESCO have called many times since 2008 for governments to reaffirm their investment in education and research, as the best way to engage and empower talent, seek solutions to global challenges and catalyse economic and social development. The global financial crisis that began in 2008 has yet to run its course, but has resulted in serious resource reductions in many areas of education and research. The timid will retreat and withdraw from the challenge, and the bold will persist