**SWiM Inspiring Stories:**

Professor Nicola Phillips, Provost, University of Melbourne in conversation with Professor Natalie Hannan

**December 2022**

**NATALIE HANNAN**

It's my great pleasure to acknowledge this *Inspiring Stories* conversation is being recorded on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, custodians and leaders of this beautiful land and waters for thousands upon thousands of years. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay our respect to their elders past and present. I also want to take this opportunity to recognise the important contribution of our First Nations colleagues and students for to our academy. And welcome to everybody listening and watching.

I'm Professor Natalie Hannan. I'm the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences. I resolutely believe we all have the right to a safe, fair, and equitable workplace, where an individual's gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, their background, race, and where disability or mental health issues should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential.

Our faculty is certainly rich in impressive and accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo, yet they are not always represented, and particularly at the senior leadership levels. We all recognise more work is needed around gender equality and broader diversity and inclusion. So I hope that by having these conversations, we will highlight the various barriers our people face and challenge our systems and celebrate diversity, and that this will inspire leadership and enhance belonging within our faculty, allowing all to reach their full potential.

Today, in our last *Inspiring Stories* for 2022, I'm honoured and delighted to introduce our Provost at the University of Melbourne, the Academic Lead for Chancellor, and the standing Deputy to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Nicola Phillips, as our guest today.

Nicola pursued her undergraduate degree at King's College London in Hispanic Studies, and then undertook her Masters in Comparative Government, followed by a PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Prior to returning to Kings later as Vice-President of Education, she held academic and leadership positions at the Universities of Warwick, Manchester, and Sheffield, including serving as the Head of the Department of Politics at Sheffield from 2014 to 2017. She has held visiting fellowships and professorships across the globe. Nicola undertook the Advanced Management program at Harvard Business School in 2019 and was President and Chair of the British International Studies Association. In 2018, she won the International Studies Association J. Ann Tickner prize. And in her spare time, Nicola is currently completing a textbook on global political economy. Prior to taking on the role here in Melbourne as Provost, Nicola was Vice Principal of Education at King's College in London. Nicola

is a Professor of Political Economy with a keen academic interest in the areas of global economics and economic governance for research, centred on the theme of inequality and global political economy. A recent focus is on production and global value change, global migration and labor standards. I just want to thank you for joining me today.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

I'm just honoured. I'm so pleased to be invited. Thank you, Natalie.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I was hoping to start the conversation by finding out a little bit more from before these amazing accolades to your early days, and then how that led to now.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

Gosh, where to start? I think there's so much that when you get to a certain point in life that you can bring into a story about how you got to where you are and what influenced you. I suppose what springs immediately to mind is that I was fortunate to have a wonderful childhood with inspiring parents, and who thoroughly I mean, in their hearts, believed in the power of education. It was their story, particularly my mother, who overcame extraordinary odds to be educated. And she had to fight for that for herself and to make a different kind of life from the one that she might otherwise have had. And my father too, in his way.

I don't ever remember a time as a child where I didn't understand the importance of education and what it could do, and the doors it could open. I was lucky enough to be academically inclined right from the start as a child. The earliest photos of me have me carrying a book around the house. I quite liked teddy bears as well, but mainly it was a book that I liked to carry. And so, I didn't need any persuading about the joy of learning. And that's something that followed me all the way through my life. So I suppose in a maybe depressingly conventional sense, it's not a surprise that I ended up in an academic career. The decisions that you then take to move within an academic career towards academic leadership rather than personal academic work, reflect that belief in education and the belief in universities and what they're all about. I can trace quite a straight line from early childhood to the kind of career that I've chosen for myself.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

You and I have had conversations before about that you were the first female professor, earlier on in your career and as a child, we don't see those barriers necessarily. It's often not until we come up a bit through our career and realise that there's something a little bit different if you're a woman.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

I remember it coming as quite a shock, I have to say. I mean, as I said, I was lucky enough to have a family background where I had the support and encouragement that I needed to think that I could do anything I chose if I worked hard. I was never left in any doubt about how anything I chose would take hard work. But I was lucky enough to come from a family background where that was a belief that I was allowed to grow up with. I don't think it has to come from a family background. I think it can come from several quarters at various stages in life. But I do remember that process of it dawning on me that while yes, and I was determined that I would carve out a path for myself, and that I wanted to do well, and that I could do this. I'd like to think that my career and life indicate a real determination, not just to let the barriers stand in my own way, but to try to knock those barriers down.

I do remember that process of beginning to understand what those barriers were and where they came from. Some of those barriers, you could sort of map out on a piece of paper and think about some of the structural barriers to gender equity or to diversity and inclusion in all of its forms. But so many of them are informal as well. So many of them are cultural, that it comes as quite a shock when you encounter them for the first time. Especially if there aren't very many people around you who have experienced those kinds of things, it's hard work figuring out how you navigate them and how you don't let them stand in your way, and you must dig deep to find that determination all of the time.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

And not letting it define who you are, knowing your self and your worth. I'm grateful that I think it's come a long way, but I'm also mindful that, as we know, we've still got important work to do.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

Oh, a huge amount of work. A huge amount of work. I am an optimist by nature and I think that's a good thing to be in life. But that doesn't stand in the way of pragmatism and realism and an understanding that while things might be immeasurably different from what I think when I started out in my career, that doesn't mean they're necessarily good yet, and it doesn't mean they're anywhere near where we need them to be. But again, maybe it's naive optimism. I'd like to think it isn't, because I think there'd be something a little bit wrong with me if by this point, I was still naive about it, having encountered so much of this over the course of my own career. But I still think that if we can hold onto that optimism and look to other people to share in that optimism and the determination, then we can continue making progress.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I think together, there's lots of us working in this space to try and champion all these things and keep going.

So I wanted to ask you next, can you pinpoint what motivated you to choose a career in economics and political science? I know that the shift more recently has come around to equality and global initiatives but is there a time that you can pinpoint that, or do you think it's something that just happened over time?

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**It’s interesting and I've thought about this quite a lot. I was never a scientist at school. Well, actually, I say that, and my mother would correct me. I always absolutely loved biology, but I was never as inclined towards some other areas of science. My strengths lay in the humanities. I wouldn't say necessarily in the arts, although that's been a lifelong passion. But I couldn't draw a circle at school, and I remember it took me 18 months to make a pillow case in one of the subjects I had to take at school. But always the humanities and particularly languages.

I remember being at school, and it was a rather old fashioned approach to learning languages at the time, where so much emphasis was on learning vocabulary and learning grammar, but as I got older, I started to realise how language gave you an insight into cultures, and I became quite fascinated by how languages worked. I did an undergraduate degree in Hispanic Studies, in Spanish and Latin American Studies broadly. Important language component, but a lot of literature, theatre studies, and cultural studies as well. And absolutely loved that. And as part of that degree, I had to spend a year in a Spanish speaking country and I went to Chile. My parents must have had endless sleepless nights about their wide-eyed daughter heading alone to Chile to go and study. It was about the time that Pinochet was leaving power and had just been voted out in the plebiscite. And I think it was that experience. Well, it was that experience among others that persuaded me that while I absolutely loved the subject matter of my undergraduate degree, I really wanted to take that interest in cultures and languages into the field of politics and international relations.

I think it was that realisation, that exposure for the first time to a kind of politics for which I had no reference point in my own experience, where politics was literally life and death, politics was fundamentally about the kinds of life that people were able to have. And of course, it is everywhere in the world, and we sometimes underestimate that. But it was so stark to me as a wide-eyed 20 year old in Chile. And I began to understand that there were levels of inequality in the world that, again, my experience hadn't prepared me to understand very well.

I remember coming back from Chile and thinking that I needed to understand this, that this was so far beyond my own experience. I needed, through enrolling in the MSC in Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics, that that was what I wanted to understand. So that has been the thread throughout my academic career, that interest in inequality, approached from a variety of angles for quite a long time. I maintained a particular regional interest in Latin America. But that broadened to thinking about other parts of the world, but always stitched together by an interest in how inequalities are produced and reproduced over time, why inequality is so durable, particularly from a political economy perspective, but not limited to socioeconomic inequality, understanding how socioeconomic inequality is bound up with gender, with race, with all of the dimensions of inequality that can be identified as working to determine the opportunities that people have in life. So that's been the thread of my academic career.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Wow. That's a brilliant story. It gives a little bit more context now to some of the things I see you leading here at the university. I think that's a great insight for our audience, so thank you for sharing.

I wanted to talk to you next about the University of Melbourne under your leadership and the leadership of others, but particularly yours, has committed to an important Respect at Melbourne program of work. And in addition to a new prevention and response to Sexual Misconduct Policy, there's been important workshops for our staff. And the University's also committed to publishing National Student Safety Survey data, as well as an annual report on sexual misconduct. This has been a clear demonstration of the university's commitment, and I personally think brave leadership. What inspired this?

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

I think it's such an important agenda for universities, and one that's been neglected, as we all know, for so long. It's generous of you to put me in the picture in that way, Natalie, thank you, but it was underway before I arrived. And so, in terms of initiating all of this work, the credit should be taken by a range of other colleagues, including the Vice Chancellor, and particularly Julie Wells and others who worked on this. It was one of the things that I noticed about this university when the opportunity had come along and I was preparing myself to be a candidate and doing all of my homework. Because there were very few universities that have really taken the stand that this university seemed to be working towards taking.

I remember early conversations about it and being really impressed with the position that had been taken on this issue. It was at the time when the new standalone policy was being developed and all the procedures were being put in place. And that policy was announced about a month after I arrived. So the groundwork had been done. There is always work to do to make sure that the policy is working in the way that we need it to, and always a feedback loop through policy and procedure. But the groundwork had been done in terms of the very public commitment that had been made and some of the work to give us the instruments that we needed to deal with this. But then, of course, you've got to do something with it. If I take any credit, it would only be shared, credit for that.

But it does need courage as an institution, and perhaps as individual people whose responsibility it is to lead in this area, to really stand up, and as it were, walk the hard yards on this. When I first arrived, one of the things that I hadn't known, and it sort of started filtering through slightly in code in conversations. I'm not sure that I understood it immediately, but it became very clear that one of the problems was that we'd made these commitments, we have the policies and procedures available to us to start working with, and of course, they adapt with time as well, but we didn't really talk about what the outcome of all of this was. And all of a sudden, somebody said it in such stark terms, it sort of hit me between the eyes, that we'd never talked about the numbers of cases even that we dealt with, let alone what the outcomes were.

Historically, there had been a great emphasis on privacy and so on. But the commitment and the leadership that had initiated this kind of work did lead us to a view that, actually, transparency was critically important, not just because transparency is for its own sake, but one of the big challenges that we had and we still have is building trust in the system. You can't possibly expect trust to be built in the system when things go into it and nobody sees what comes out of it. And saying to people, "Trust as we're doing the work" isn't really enough. People do need to see. I don't think it's so much that we wouldn't be able to provide the detail of exactly what happens to individual cases as they go through. People want to know how the system works and they want to know how the system would work for them if they needed to come forward and use the system. They need to know that there are outcomes and consequences and that our commitment is real. But I think more than anything, it's a demonstration of the seriousness of the issue and how seriously we, as an institution, take it. And perhaps going back to your comments, that we do do this. We don't just talk about it, we do it. And we do have the courage to do it and we do have the conviction to do it. And that's not to say that everything's perfect at all times. It's a journey. But the important thing is we're on it.

We can't expect people to trust the system if they don't see what's happening. And so, that commitment to transparency was a really important step. And I remember making a video. I arrived in September, and I think the video went out at the end of November. And I talked about the numbers of cases that had been dealt with recently. Maybe I just missed it, but still hadn't quite expected the reaction. So many people wrote after that to pick up on that bit. The video is about all sorts of things, about teaching and learning and about D&I more generally, all sorts of questions about the university. But it was that thing that prompted quite several emails in my inbox where people said, "Well, we've never heard that before."

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yeah, I think that's the part that, for me, is the bravery piece, because obviously, and I think it's important that we made the commitment to the policy and then the workshops but as you say, the transparency of what is happening and how we're dealing with this. I think we've tried to hide these things to pretend that we don't have these issues and we just quietly deal with it. But the people who are going through this that are a bystander or someone who's been through it, they want to know that something has been done. I think this is where it makes us look, it can put us in the spotlight that these are the types of behaviours. And by being honest, every university or every organisation is possibly having this, it's what you do after that I think is the brave piece. A lot of people would probably not want to publicly air this, but I think that video when I first saw that, that was something I thought this is inspiring, because we've got someone here who will actually say we're not perfect and we do have those issues, and we're committed to dealing with that. We hope to one day be perfect, but at this stage, it's not. And we're all working together on this, but I think if we didn't have that commitment from the Vice Chancellor, yourself, Julie, the team, collectively, there's a lot of people involved that I think it wouldn't have the importance that we are seeing it has now.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**  
Well, I think I'd have to agree with that. One of the things that I think we can be proud of or that I feel proud of is the commitment of the university's leadership team to this, that people are willing to stand up and really commit to this and to do the work. But it is also shared. I've sort of said in other messages, that everybody has a responsibility here. And one of the really heartening things has been to see the reaction to that. I think once that course is charted, as it were, then people really have been swinging behind it. But we've got a long way to go still.

One of the things that I'd like to think, and I know to be the case, that people would think is that... This is such a difficult issue. And each individual case is so unique and so complex, and each individual person has a unique set of difficulties and challenges, but there are always difficulties and challenges in people coming forward to talk about what's happened to them or, alternatively, what they've seen happen to other people. It is difficult. And I think once people do that, then I think increasingly, again, we've got a long way to go, but increasingly, our record in terms of how we handle them and the outcomes and so on is something that we can look at and we can think this is good, we're making progress and so on. What worries me is that that's what happens once things get into the system. But there's so much that doesn't get into the system in the first place for all sorts of reasons.

Like every other organisation in every other sector, we do have an underreporting problem still. I certainly know from personal experience as well, that that first time that somebody tries to raise something, whether it's with another colleague or another Head of Department, is such a determining factor then in whether somebody feels that they have the... I mean, it takes courage, whatever the circumstances, but that they have support then to come and ask for action to be taken through the formal process.

So it's not just what happens once it gets into the system, it's not just what people in my kind of position do when they're called on to take decisions then about the outcomes of cases and so on. It's that very first point of contact where somebody says, "This is happening to me." If we don't get that right, then it simply doesn't get into the system so that we have an opportunity to do the right thing. So that's where I lie awake thinking about what more we can do to build the trust in the system so that people do come forward.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yeah. I think fundamental to a lot of this is issues of gender inequity and diversity and inclusion issues. But also, we're seeing in the media, a lot of this playing out right now where quite well-known women are coming forward to seek justice for the sexual harassment and violence that they have suffered. And we know this is playing out right now with Brittany Higgins, and Grace Tame, and others. I guess the question I have is why do you think it's so important we have a victim-centered approach? Because I know that's the approach we've taken in the new policy. I think what you're saying is if we can't have at least a safe as we can space for these people to come forward, I think we won't have these people at least even coming forward to report at all.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

No, that's right. Let's face it, as you say, we see this play out around us all the time. I think this is sometimes really underestimated, so I'm going to say it again, and apologies for repeating myself from what I've said previously, but it takes courage to come forward. People must dig really deep to do this. We absolutely must be committed to solid process. We must do it in the right way. We must do it fairly and carefully and so on, but then take action and be decisive in taking action and be prepared to defend the action then that we have taken. But there's so much emphasis on that end of the chain, as it were, and I think still too little emphasis in the public narrative about this issue as to what it takes to come forward in the first place and how we can better support people to do that. There are quite a few things that we've put in place and will continue to put in place that are aimed to assist people before they get to the point where they're ready to do that, before they get to the point where they're sort of convinced that this is what they must do, just to help a little bit in the thinking process. And sometimes that can be about opportunities just to sort of reflect on what's been happening, or it's about allowing people to understand better what will happen when they do that. Some of the feedback that our students particularly have given us is that if they make a complaint, they don't understand what happens next and what will be required of them, and what's the process that they will have to go through and so on. So work to enable them to understand that a little bit better. But also, I think just those kinds of encouragement that come from hearing people give clear messages about the commitment on this.

One of the things that I found most, I really welcomed, and I was moved by most over the course of this process, it's anecdotal and n equals one and all of that, but still, it made me think that there was value in this, that I learned anecdotally of somebody who had experienced sexual harassment and really didn't want to come forward. It was the video message that we did in response to the National Student Safety Survey results. And she says that she watched it and then watched it again, and then came back and watched it a couple of days later and decided on that basis, based on what she heard, that she was going to come forward and talk to somebody about what the process of making a complaint would be.

I'm pleased to say that the advice that she received emboldened her to do that. And the case followed its course to the outcome where there was a finding of serious misconduct, and the individual was dismissed. Even though you're sort of talking into a video camera, I've learned over the course of the last 18 months or so, not to underestimate the impact that simply hearing somebody give clear messages about this can have. But we've still got a long way to go. I'd like to think that we're in motion on this.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I think the power of all of this and thinking about transparency of process and building trust is the other part, as well as courage from people to come forward. So yeah, I totally agree. I wanted to just touch on the 2030 Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. And many of us across the university, and particularly in our Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, are working towards the goals and action outlined. What are your thoughts around what we absolutely must commit to doing to enhance the uptake of this? And not so much the specific nitty gritty, because the strategy's there for everybody to see. But I think as a leader who clearly aligns with diversity and inclusion as an important part of our environment, what do you think we all, our own responsibilities, could be through these next few years to 2030?

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

Yeah, that's a huge question. We have a plan that encompasses so many different areas that are all urgent and important. We could talk for hours and hours about the specifics and what needs to be done on racism and what needs to be done on gender diversity and equity and so on. But just in general, I think the foundational requirement of all of this is real commitment and accountability, I suppose. And I don't just mean that in terms of the sort of sticks of accountability, but a real sense of shared accountability that we have a responsibility to one another in this, that we keep each other accountable in the most positive sense on this. Not just about pushing forward with conversations, but about picking up where there might be things going on that are not consistent with the principles or the actions that we've set for ourselves, or where there's a bit of a danger of us slipping away from some of those for whatever reason. And I don't mean just because people don't care, but so having the courage to recognise that people aren't necessarily ill-intentioned, but just to say, "Well, hold on, that doesn't sit well," or "Hold on, I'm not sure that we're thinking about this in the right way." And that can be quite hard to do. And too often, it falls to the same people to be doing that all the time. So we need to sort of broaden the base of people who really are, as it were, swinging into this agenda, not just expecting that it's done.

And I think that would lead to my second point, that it's incredibly important that we have a *Diversity and Inclusion Strategy,* and incredibly important that we have a D&I Action Plan. But it's not a standalone thing. Diversity and Inclusion and the commitments that are articulated in the strategy must run through every aspect of our work. And so, it is right that we have a lead person in each faculty, normally an Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion. It's right that we have a Diversity and Inclusion team is sitting here in Chancellery. It's right that we have people in leadership positions for various aspects of our work. But the danger that we've got to guard against is that everybody just assumes that it's the D&I people who do D&I, it's the people with D&I in their job title who do it.

We've got to get to the point where this is permeating every aspect of what we do, right across our academic work and all of our professional work. And again, that's about people really swinging into this and understanding that it's not a standalone strategy, it's an overarching proposition, I suppose, for what kind of university we're going to be, what kind of culture we want to work and study in, what we're trying to create for ourselves. So I think it's those foundational commitments that are really important, alongside all of the specific work that we need to do on the various areas and issues that are encompassed in a D&I strategy. And I think just a recognition that this isn't something that's in the hands of a group of people. This is for everybody. We all have responsibilities to one another and to our university in creating the environment that you outlined in your introductory comments to your series, Natalie, that this is a responsibility that we all share, and we can't just leave somebody else to care about that and think about it. It has to be a mindset, not just a set of actions. I think we have to and again, as an optimist, I'd like to think and I do think that the pandemic has changed something about how we operate. I think it has introduced a much more human element into the way that we think about community in the university, and perhaps across society as well, that it has made us more focused on the need to look out for one another, and the importance of physical and mental health, and the connections that that has with the workplace. And in the same way as we talk about everything that we've learned in relation to teaching, and learning, and technology and so on, I think it would be disastrous if we lost that.

When we talk about the learnings of the pandemic, I think that's one of them that we've really got to hold onto. And I think part of it is what we can do as a university to make sure that we are allowing people to prioritise health and wellbeing in their working life, what we can do to support people who may be experiencing difficulties. But it's also about understanding from people as we go along in this process, what our needs are. And I think there's a sense in which we're perhaps not fully aware of some of those ourselves as we're in a transition process now to fully returning to campus life, to working as a university in ways that are not so familiar to us after two or three years of the pandemic. And so, we're just gonna have to keep talking to one another about what's needed in order to make sure that we're attentive and sensitive to those kinds of needs. And I think your colleague, I think it was a colleague who

**NATATLIE HANNAN**

It was someone from the audience, so they're anonymous.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

I think the gist of the question; it was absolutely right, that we need to focus on staff as much as students, that we need to understand that students arriving now in the university or perhaps arriving back in the university have had a very different experience from students in other cohorts that preceded them and really worked to understand what their academic and personal needs are. But also do the same with staff. Again, it's not something that can just be plucked out of thin air, because we need to base it on a real understanding of what people need. And so, that loop of conversation is important as we go along.

One of the things that I certainly noticed when I arrived in the university was that we, although, there was ample recognition of the need for work, specifically on racism, but also on racism at its intersections with other identities, as you put it. There was a recognition of the need for that work, but we hadn't advanced with it in the way that clearly is needed. And so, in discussion with many other colleagues, we accelerated that work. And since Pip Nicholson was appointed as Deputy Vice Chancellor, people and community, we've been able to accelerate that further to the point now where we have a framework around racism that has been through a lot of consultation and discussion and we will be preparing to make public in the new year. So that's a framework. And it will need it to be followed by an action plan, and we'll need a lot of input into how to do that, the framework consists of a definition of racism, a contextualisation within our own university, and a statement of commitment on behalf of the university and the university community on racism. And then we will start to work on exactly what this needs to look like in practice. But again, that work is absolutely indispensable and it lays the foundations for this. But a framework and an action plan themselves are not the end of the question.

What we've got to achieve is that shift in mindset where people understand racism and people understand the ways in which it works and feel themselves committed to the project of addressing it. There's a lot of work to do there, but I really am pleased to say the person who asked the question, that this has been a major focus for some time. And in the new year, there will be a lot of further work on it.

**NATALILE HANNAN**

Right. Thank you so much. So finally if you woke tomorrow as boss of Australia... actually, let's make it the world, if such a position existed, if there's one thing you could change to truly enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion, what would it be?

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

If we think about the world context about the education of girls, I'd probably go there. I think that is one of the many foundational answers to the question that you've posed. Not the only one, but such an important one.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Such an important one. If we think we can enhance equity of access for all girls, women, and non-binary folks to be able to access that, that would be huge. Thank you Nicola so much for joining me today and sharing some of your incredible inspiring story with us. This is the last *Inspiring Stories* for 2022.

For our audience, we look forward to bringing you more in the New Year, starting on the 14th of March 2023. And so for our audience I'll be in touch further with details in the new year and the link for the registration. So again, thanks so much, Nicola, for joining us today.

**NICOLA PHILLIPS**

Thank you Natalie.