

Jeremy Guy Ashcroft Davis AM FRSN 4 December 1942–13 June 2023

Robert Marks and others¹



Jeremy Davis AM FRSN used to say that one of his best pieces of luck was when, as a 13-year-old, he was thrown into debating and made the team's third speaker, a role which demanded a lot of thinking on his feet. "You have to live by your wits and, while you need a structured argument, you also need to respond to the dynamics of what has been going on," he would muse. "That experience also helped me overcome any fears about public speaking, and I've often thought that teacher did me a real favour by

not letting me off the hook." He went on to graduate from the University of Sydney as University Medallist, Bachelor of Economics with First Class Honours in Accounting, in 1964. Debating would also have exposed him to strategic interactions among debaters: how to counter and attack, as did his experience in student politics, both in the SRC, as President of the University of Sydney Union, and as Vice-President of the National Union of University Students (where he met his wife, later Dr. Jessica Milner Davis FRSN).

Jeremy Davis became the second Dean and Director of the Australian Graduate School of Management in 1980, just four years after the AGSM was founded at UNSW, based on the Cyert Report's recommendation to the Australian Government that a national school with a strong research orientation and an independent Board of Management, should be established in a University willing to host it under those conditions. Richard Cyert was Dean of Carnegie Mellon University, which had just such a research-based school of management. Jeremy served as Dean of the AGSM, teaching as well as leading it, until 1989, when he stepped down as Dean and took up the role of Professor of Strategy at the AGSM. He remained at the School until it was absorbed into the UNSW Faculty of Commerce and Economics in 2006.

¹ This obituary has benefitted from the contributions of many of Jeremy's past AGSM colleagues, especially Bob Wood, John Roberts AM FRSN, Roger Collins AM, Baljit Singh, and Timothy Devinney. Jessica Milner Davis FRSN has also contributed.

In 1980 Jeremy was an unusual appointment: he did not have a conventional academic background, having chosen not to pursue the offered PhD at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, after completing his MBA and a Masters of Economics while lecturing there. Instead, he started his business career with Boston Consulting Group (BCG) at a time when the company was small and rapidly growing, and soon moved from Boston to Paris to help set up their French office. In 1974 he was asked to serve as Managing Partner and open BCG's second US office in San Francisco, a challenging time when businesses were struggling financially while BCG was rapidly hiring new recruits. This led to Jeremy's pioneering work in consulting to banks and financial services about their social as well as economic impacts. In 1978, after building a successful Californian team, he returned as Managing Partner to Paris where a daughter Rachel was born to him and Jessica. Two years later, UNSW's then Chancellor, Sir Robert Webster, encouraged him to return to Australia and the new AGSM.

On first meeting Jeremy, we faculty members at AGSM were not disappointed — he was intelligent, engaged, and curious about us, our teaching, and our careers. He proceeded to target and hire people both as faculty and students who have gone on to brilliant academic careers in Australia and abroad.

He was the prototype of the true academic in all but a lengthy list of publications, the modern, often misguided, marker of contribution to knowledge. Despite this, in 2003 he was elected President of the highly prestigious Society of Strategic Management by academics from leading universities in the USA and Europe, based on his lectures and

other key contributions to the discourses that shaped the field. He had the sharpest of intellects and was a leading thinker in the then nascent area of business strategy, which brought together the disciplines of economics, sociology and psychology in the study of organizational strategies in competitive environments. His acceptance and high standing among academics were also evident at UNSW, where he was twice elected President of the Academic Board and served on the University Council, chairing various committees and working parties and advocating for academic input into university decision-making.

During his Deanship at the AGSM, Jeremy built a diverse culture of young academics that included basic researchers and those with more applied and policy interests. Under his leadership, the AGSM became recognized as Australia's leading business school. Most of the young academics he recruited progressed from lecturer to professor and became internationally recognized scholars. The AGSM became known for rigour and critical debate. Jeremy sat on all admission, selection and promotions decisions, often championing unusual cases when he saw value to the School. He attended research seminars presented by staff and visiting scholars where his intellect was evident in his forensic questioning of the presenter.

A major mission of the School during his leadership was the training of future Australian academics as he foresaw the burgeoning growth of business schools around the nation. Jeremy attended all doctoral thesis presentations, reorganizing his schedule when needed. His support of PhD students mostly offset the fear they felt when anticipating his cross examina-

tion during their presentations. They came away with better theses for his input. And, over time, he did publish a number of book chapters and journal articles on business strategy.

As well as an academic side, the AGSM had an applied side. Under Jeremy's leadership, the School developed executive programs that trained Australian managers in the latest evidence-based models and methods. Everything was underpinned with a commitment to rigour. Populist management models and the Harvard case-based teaching that relied solely on practitioner anecdotes were replaced with rigorous analyses of problems that combined practical insights with research evidence. The mix was underpinned by Jeremy's belief that academics needed to strike a balance between providing students with intellectual and conceptual structures and giving them learning opportunities to master these concepts.

As Dean, he insisted on the AGSM's founding autonomy, as envisaged by the Cyert Report and UNSW as host institution. He successfully argued for the School's right to pay salary supplementation and housing loans, publish student teaching evaluations and charge fees for the short-courses that would fund such things, a first in Australia's then fully-regulated university sector. Later, he lobbied the Federal Government for deregulation in the larger academic sector, particularly in overseas student fees and academic merit payments. He was a strong opponent of the controversial "Unified National System" of amalgamated tertiary institutions proposed by federal Minister John Dawkins in the late 1980s, foreseeing a resulting diminution of quality and specialisation. Owing to the efforts of Jeremy and

others, UNSW itself was happily spared this fate. He had strong views on how universities and educational institutions should be managed with proper academic involvement and avoiding second-rate managerialism and reflected this as a Ministerial nominee in a review of governance of South Australian universities.

Given Jeremy's commitment to interaction and learning between the University and the business world, he became involved with many companies and enquiries in wider society both as professor and after his retirement from UNSW in 2006. He was Deputy Chairman of small venture capital group AMWIN Management Pty Ltd and a long-term Director of the subsequent CHAMP Ventures Ltd; he was Chairman of Capral Aluminium Ltd and a Director of Singapore Power and the SP AusNet Group; a Director of the ASX and of Transurban Group. For the Hawke-Keating Government, he chaired the Australian Industries Development Corporation Limited, a pioneering future fund for Australia later dissolved by John Howard's government. He also delighted in serving on the boards of innumerable small innovative high-tech ventures including Nucleus Limited (the cochlear implant company), Gradipore Limited, XRT Limited and the Very Small Particle Company Limited. He was a Board member of the St. James Ethics Centre (which he had helped found) and of the NSW Division of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, of which he was a Fellow, as well as the now defunct Australian Institute of Management (NSW and ACT). He chaired a number of high-level Federal government advisory committees and enquiries. In 2018 he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of New South Wales.

His duties as Dean and Director never interfered with his teaching. Jeremy's Strategy and Negotiation courses were always oversubscribed. They were both the most demanding of courses and the most popular. No AGSM alumni event goes by without someone sharing a story of what they learnt in Jeremy's courses and how he sharpened their analytic skills. They also testify to his continued support and wise counsel for many in their later careers and lives.

He was a devoted father, uncle and husband — for 52 years. He had many extra-mural interests including his and Jessica's enthusiasm and support for Sydney's Pinchgut Opera, the Bangarra Dance Company, Taikoz and for the Adelaide Festival, where they would meet up for a chat with friends. He was active in environmental and Indigenous and human rights causes, supporting many financially through his family trust, the Sisyphus Foundation.

Jeremy's contributions to education were recognized with an AM in 2008: "for service to tertiary education, particularly as an educator in the discipline of strategic management, through a range of academic administrative roles, and to business and commerce." In 2013, the University of Sydney presented him with its Alumni Award for Professional Achievement. He contributed so much more in his many Board roles, on government committees and in his charitable endeavours. Jeremy will be sorely missed by all his friends and colleagues at the Royal Society, the University of New South Wales, the University of Sydney, the Society of Strategic Management, and beyond.

Jeremy's funeral, for family, close friends and colleagues, was held on 26 June. There will be a Memorial Service celebrating Jeremy's life at his original alma mater, the University of Sydney, on 22 September and all who knew him are warmly welcome to attend. Please email jgadavismemorial@gmail.com for further information.

