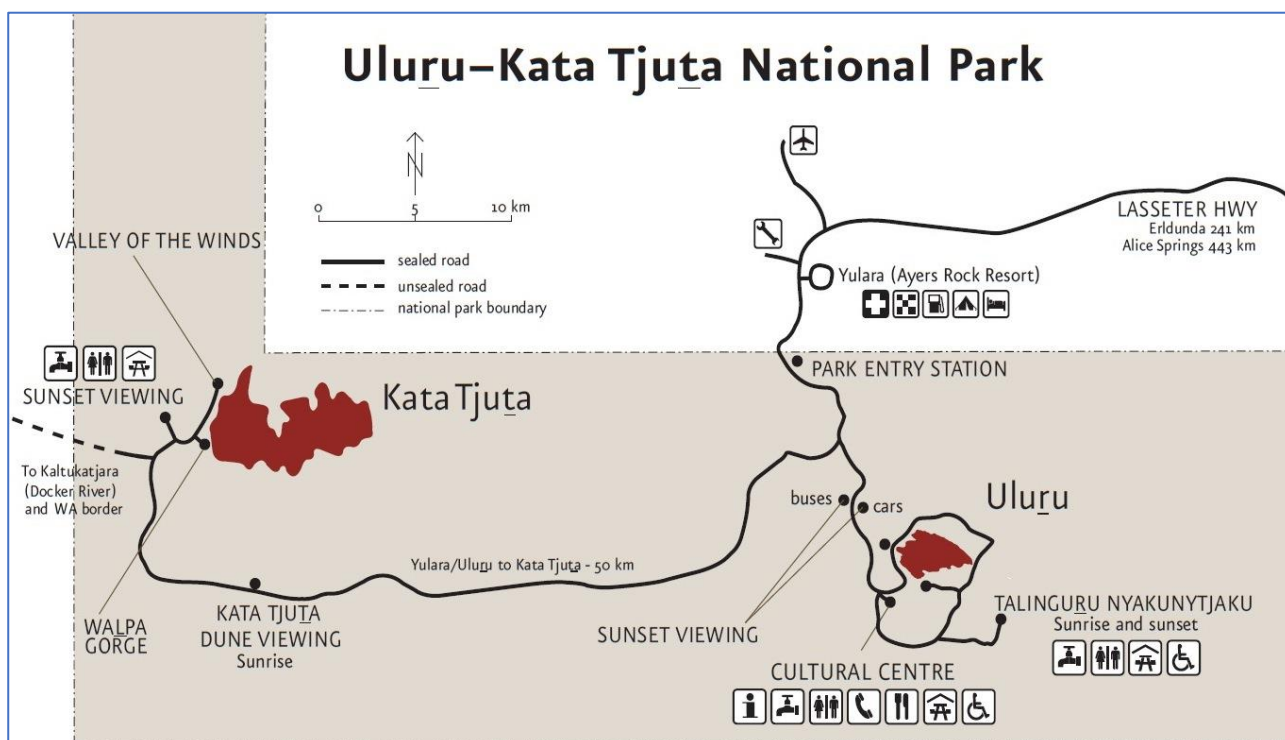


Ever been to Uluru with your grandkids?

Brian Ralph

** My apologies but this article began simply as an excuse to publish a list of Uluru/Kata Tjuta activities that I'd researched prior to our kids and grandkids going there last year. In addition however, I am aware that any number of my friends (yes, I do have friends) have never been to Uluru. It's always been on their travel list, but other alternatives have always led them astray. This article is an attempt to provide some background info on what to expect and what to do, should you be enticed to explore this amazing place.*



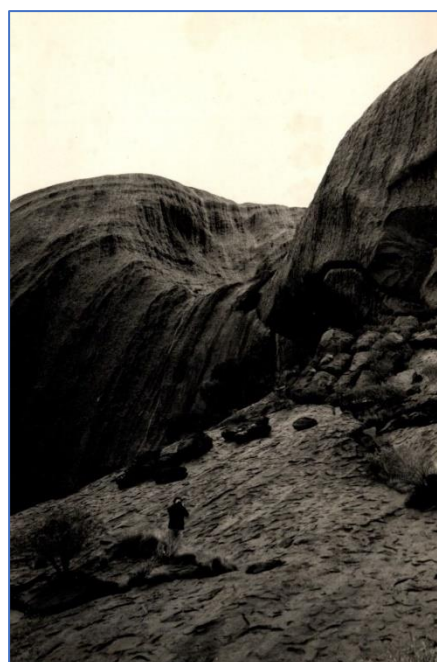
Map courtesy of Parks Australia

Back to the 70s

The first time I ever visited Uluru was back in September 1974, a result of me convincing the young fellow sitting next to me in the staffroom that he and his wife (recently married) should join my wife and I (also recently married) on a 'safari' coach ride to Central Australia during the September school holidays.

The tour was operated by Vacation Tours (remember them and their constant advertising in the Federation newspaper during the 1970s and 1980s?). We left on the Friday evening at the start of the school holidays and two weeks later returned on the Sunday night before school began, having just travelled more than 9,000kms from Sydney to Darwin, Alice Springs, Uluru, Coober Pedy, Broken Hill and back to Sydney.

Going 'safari' meant that we had to provide our own tents, sleeping bags and food. All they gave us was a seat on the coach. The other option was 'all-inclusive' where the company supplied all camping equipment plus a cook and three meals a day. It was a fabulous adventure and we made several lifelong friends, including our travel buddies who recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.



Uluru, September 1974

The next time we went to Uluru was 12 months later in September 1975, once again with Vacation Tours, but this time as the cooks on one of their buses. (How we became the cooks is a whole new story for another time!) The most memorable experience on that trip was that we were one of the first buses to be allowed back into Darwin after Cyclone Tracy. The stark contrast between the lovely laid-back tropical city of September 1974 and its devastated remains in September 1975 was very confronting.

Since then my wife and I have returned to Uluru about 6-7 times, including taking our teenage kids there in the 1990s and having our kids and grandkids join us there in April last year. There is something very special about [Uluru](#) and [Kata Tjuta](#) (The Olgas). The more we go the more we learn about and appreciate [Anangu culture](#). Even flights to Darwin see us diverting for a four-day stopover at Uluru on our way there.

Getting there

The fastest, most convenient way of getting there is by air. From Sydney it's a 3½ hour flight to Ayers Rock/Connellan Airport on Jetstar or Qantas. Other alternatives include hiring a car in Alice Springs or driving your own car (maybe as part of a bigger Central Australia discovery trip, e.g. driving there via the [Red Centre Way?](#)), catching a local bus/coach from Alice Springs or signing up for a commercial multi-day package tour (travel + accommodation) out of Alice Springs or from one of the capital cities.



Book a helicopter ride and see this view of Uluru

** If you're flying in from Sydney, book early and book window seats on the LHS of the plane. Exactly 15 minutes before touchdown look out your window to see Mt Conner, a huge mesa in the middle of the desert some 95kms from Uluru. Six minutes later look out the LHS once again to see a fabulous view of Uluru, standing like a huge sentinel in the desert. Four minutes later look out the RHS of the aircraft and there you'll see Lake Amadeus, the largest salt lake in the Northern Territory. Finally, depending on from which direction you are approaching the airstrip, two minutes from touchdown look out the RHS once again to see Kata Tjuta in the distance. Fantastic!*

Getting around once you're there

Upon arrival at Ayers Rock/Connellan Airport there's a free return coach transfer for all Ayers Rock Resort hotel guests to their accommodation in Yulara township. There are also several rental car operators at the airport terminal. It's a ten minute drive from the airport to the township of Yulara.

Once in Yulara, a free shuttle bus operates every 20 minutes to deliver you to the Town Square or move you around to the different hotels, restaurants, cafes and other facilities.

If you don't have your own vehicle, or haven't picked up a rental car at the airport, you can join one of the many local coach tours, or buy a hop-on hop-off bus pass to get you out to Uluru and Kata Tjuta each day.

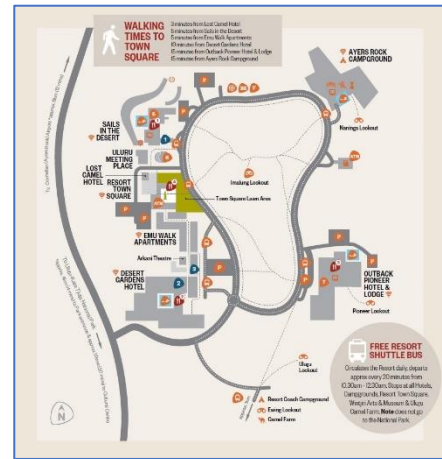
** Personally I would strongly recommend having your own car/rental car as this will give you much greater flexibility and choice in the days ahead. Car options range from small cars to SUVs, 4WDs and people-movers. Car seats and boosters can also be supplied at additional cost, but definitely book well in advance!*

Yulara township and accommodation

Due to the rapidly increasing negative impacts of relatively uncontrolled tourism around Uluru and Kata Tjuta during the 1960s and 1970s, the Commonwealth Government relocated the existing airfield and built a new township outside the national park. This new town was called Yulara and the original Ayers Rock village, only a few kilometres from Uluru, was renamed Mutitjulu and became the home base for the local Aboriginal community.

Apart from [Longitude 31°](#), a separate luxury desert wilderness camp 3kms east of Yulara, all other accommodation options come under the banner of 'Ayers Rock Resort' and these places are spaced out around the main circular drive that forms the core of the town.

[Accommodation options](#) at Ayers Rock Resort range from Sails in the Desert (5 star 'luxury' hotel) through to the Desert Gardens Hotel (4½ star hotel with views of Uluru from some rooms), Emu Walk Apartments (4 star 2-3 bedroom apartments with kitchens and laundries etc), Lost Camel Hotel (3½ star boutique hotel with 'compact' rooms), Outback Pioneer Hotel (3½ star motel accommodation) and Ayers Rock Campground (cabins, powered sites, unpowered sites). *To get the accommodation of your choice, maybe as part of an Ayres Rock Resort package deal, I recommend booking well in advance.*



Yulara (Ayers Rock Resort)

** Although we stayed with our kids and grandkids at Sails in the Desert last year, and were initially planning to stay in the Emu Walk Apartments with their kitchens and bedrooms (until we realised they had stairs but we had tiny tots – not a good mix I would think), our preference over many previous years has been the Outback Pioneer Hotel with its value-for-money motel-style accommodation, easy access, easy car parking, hotel bar and bottle shop with BBQ grill, nearby restaurant and 'Outback Kitchen' serving pizzas, hamburgers, fish and chips etc.*

Weather

While we have four seasons, the Anangu have [five](#). Perhaps the best time to visit is either April-May or August-September, when the days are warm-hot and the nights not too cold. Summer sees scorching heat and thunderstorms, while Winter sees freezing cold nights.

However all weather can be variable, and I can still remember waking up at the old Ayers Rock campground (later the site of the Azaria Chamberlain tragedy) in September 1974 to see huge silver cascades of water coming off Uluru as the rain came down. Twice we've gone to the Sounds of Silence Dinner on an almost cloudless afternoon, only to be caught several hours later in a freak desert thunderstorm!

Food and drinks

A range of restaurants, bars and cafes can be found in the three largest hotels and in the Yulara Town Square. For those in the Emu Walk Apartments and Campground, there is also a compact but well-stocked IGA in the Town Square. You can only buy take-away alcohol at the Outback Pioneer Hotel, and this requires you to prove that you are a guest at the resort.

For those interested in a more unique dining experience, there are also a range of [up-market dining events](#) including the Sounds of Silence Dinner.

Shopping

The [Town Square](#) is the main site for things like the IGA supermarket, three cafes, newsagent, post office, bank, hair and beauty salon and a range of souvenir, clothing and gift shops (assuming these are now all back open post-Covid). The [Cultural Centre](#), located inside the national park at the base of Uluru, has two art and craft galleries plus a café and souvenir shop.

Understanding Anangu culture

Perhaps the best place to start is on the [Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park website](#), which devotes a whole section to this topic. In addition the [Ayers Rock Resort website](#) also has a very useful page as well.

Once you're at Uluru, perhaps the best place to go first is the [Cultural Centre](#), located at the base of Uluru. The Tjukurpa Tunnel features Anangu art, historical documentaries and explanations of Anangu law, traditions and appropriate behaviour.

A fourth major source of information about Uluru, Kata Tjuta, the national park and its people are the free [ranger-guided activities](#), walks and talks. If you can't make any of these or prefer DIY, several of the walks at Uluru are well-explained through numerous information panels along the track.

Climbing the rock

The climb to the top of Uluru was closed permanently in October 2019.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO AT ULURU WITH THE GRANDKIDS?

** Below is a list of activities I researched for our kids and grandkids when they joined us at Uluru last year. Please note these don't include every possible activity and event, especially for adults (I'd be here for days, and the revised list would probably be out of date next week!). As a result you'll need to browse the websites referenced below for additional activities and events (especially the more expensive options or those suited only for adults). In addition, this list was developed for April 2022, and already I have noticed more events and activities on the Uluru websites as a result of the downgrading of Covid concerns, re-opening of businesses and the re-energising of the tourism market.*

(a) At Yulara

- [Bush Food Experience](#) (Town Square Amphitheatre, Arkani Theatre, 1.00pm, duration 45 mins) – “Learn about Australian and local bush tucker and how for many centuries local Indigenous groups would hunt, gather and prepare these bush foods. This will be followed by a fun cooking demonstration utilising a flavoursome Indigenous ingredient that you can try at home.” *Need to book well in advance (free).*
- [Dot painting workshop](#) (2.00-3.30pm, duration 1½ hrs) – “Join Indigenous artists and learn about the different symbols used to create beautiful works of art depicting Creation Time (Tjukurpa) stories. Create your own artwork to take home as a memento of your experience.” *Need to book well in advance (\$72/adult, \$36/child).*
- [Guided Garden Walks](#) (Town Square, 8.45am and 4.00pm, duration 45 mins) – “Meet at the Town Square Flag Poles where your Guide will show you around the Resort Gardens highlighting the seasonal local flora, bush foods, trees native to Australia and the medicines traditionally used.” *Need to book well in advance (free).*
- [Bush Yarns](#) (Town Square Lawn Circle of Sand, 10.00/10.30/11.00/11.30, duration 30 mins) – “Listen to the stories of Aboriginal culture and tradition where you will be shown men's weapons that were used for hunting or women's tools and techniques to gather bush tucker in the central desert. These sessions may also provide an opportunity to learn aspects about the local Pitjantjatjara language.” *Need to book well in advance (free).*
- [Didgeridoo Workshop](#) (Town Square Lawn Stage, 3.00pm Mon/Wed/Fri/Sat, duration 45 mins) – “Listen to the enchanting sounds of the didgeridoo. Yidaki, the traditional Aboriginal term for the didgeridoo, was discovered in East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. During this workshop, guests are invited to try and play the didgeridoo.” *Need to book well in advance (free).*



- **[Paint Your Own Australian Animal](#)** (Lungkata Room, Sails in the Desert Hotel, duration 45 mins) – Children will be able to paint their own Australian animal (wooden creatures or stencils and paint). Parental supervision is required. *Need to book well in advance (free).*
- **[Sounds of Silence Dinner](#)** This tour departs approx. one hour before sunset and returns four hours later. Canapés and champers on a sand dune looking across to Uluru, followed by a sit-down buffet dinner plus didgeridoo playing and talk by an astronomer about the stars in the night sky.
- **[Field of Light](#)** Need to pre-book on a 1½ hour paid tour. Tour departs from 30 mins after sunset, with pickup from all hotels. First bus returns after 45 mins, then buses return regularly after that. (Sorry but they won't let you drive there.)
- **[Camel rides](#)** (1.40pm each day, 90 minute tour includes 45 min camel ride plus visit to the camel farm museum, suitable for children 5 years and over, pickup from your hotel, \$80pp).
- **[Harley ride around the Rock](#)** One hour duration, children 8 yrs and older, pickup at hotel, \$219pp.
- **[Helicopter scenic flights to Uluru or Uluru+Kata Tjuta](#)**: [15 min scenic flight over Uluru](#) (\$150pp), [25 min scenic flight over Uluru and Kata-Tjuta](#) (\$265pp)



Field of Light

(b) At Uluru

- **[Uluru Sunset](#)** See the fantastic changing colours of Uluru as the sun sets in the western sky. The drive from Yulara to the official Sunset Viewing Area on Uluru Road (13.5 kms) takes 13-18 mins, depending on the traffic. *Very busy* during all holidays, especially Easter, so maybe get there an hour or so before sunset to get a good spot and maybe take cheese and biccies etc and make it a party. My suggestion is to do this activity sooner rather than later, just in case later days are overcast/raining/far too crowded.
- **[Kantju Gorge Sunset](#)** If you've already seen an Uluru sunset from the Sunset Viewing Area, why not head to the Mala Walk Car Park and walk to Kantju Gorge, located at the end of the Mala Walk, for a deeply serene sunset experience at the foot of the rock. There are a couple of benches near the waterhole where you can sit and soak up the atmosphere – a photographer's delight.
- **[Uluru Sunrise](#)** See the changing colours of Uluru and Kata Tjuta at sunrise from the Sunrise Viewing Platform. The 24km drive from Yulara takes 22-30 mins, depending on the traffic. I suggest you get there at least 30 mins before sunrise (if not earlier) and take some snacks for the kids. I also suggest you do this sooner rather than later, just in case later days are overcast/raining/far too crowded. *Very busy* during holidays, especially Easter – allow extra time, and get there earlier to get a decent parking spot.
- **[Mala Walk](#)** (2 km return, 90 min leisurely walk from the base of Uluru across to Kantju Gorge) Do your own self-guided family walk using information signs along the track, or join the ranger-guided walk (8.00am in warm months or 10.00am in cold months). "Our park rangers will stop at various sites to talk about the meaning of rock art, demonstrate the tools traditionally used by Anangu and tell you the [Tjukurpa](#) (creation stories) of many rock formations. The rangers will also explain how Uluru and Kata Tjuta formed and talk about the desert environment and the animals and plants that live here." The 19.5km drive from Yulara to the Mala Walk Car Park on Uluru Road takes 19-25 mins, depending on the traffic. There are toilets and picnic tables in the carpark, which is located right at the base of Uluru.

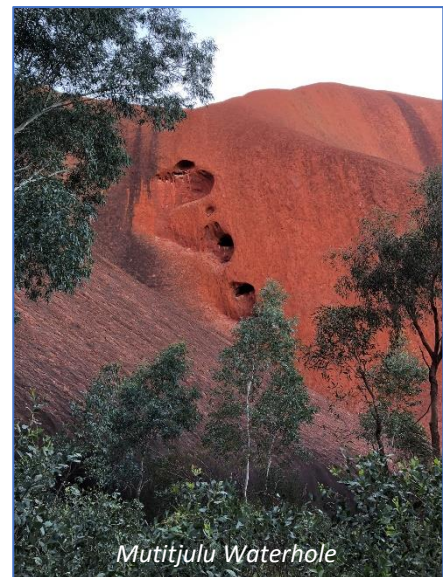


Uluru sunrise

The Mala Walk is very busy mid-morning and late afternoon with guided tours, midday is usually far too hot, so why not go *early* morning or at sunset (see 'Kantju Gorge Sunset').

- **[Kuniya-Mutitjulu Walk](#)** (1 km return, 45 min leisurely walk from the Kuniya Car Park to the Mutitjulu Waterhole) Do your own self-guided family walk using information signs along the track. "One of the few permanent water sources around Uluru, Mutitjulu Waterhole is a place where you can sit quietly and listen to the sounds of the beginning of time. This is one of the few places in the park where you may see wallabies among the tall grasses and river red gum trees. [Bush foods](#) also abound, including tjantu (bush tomatoes), *ili* (figs) and arngu^{li} (bush plums). The walk is a living cultural landscape. It's the site of one of Uluru's most dramatic creation stories – [the deadly battle between Kuniya \(the python woman\) and Liru \(the poisonous brown snake man\)](#)."

The Kuniya Walk car park is 24kms (23-26 mins) along the Uluru Road, depending on when you decide to visit. Due to its great popularity, the best times to visit are early morning, lunchtime or at sunset.



Mutitjulu Waterhole

- **[Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre](#)** The Cultural Centre is located on Uluru Road 17kms from Yulara and 1km from the base of Uluru. "Here you can learn about Anangu culture and the park's natural environment through exhibits and [free presentations](#) with Anangu and park rangers. There are also displays, a visitor information desk, [Aboriginal art galleries](#) and several community-owned shops and facilities." There's also a café for food, drinks and souvenirs, plus a picnic area with under-cover tables and gas BBQs.
- **[Uluru Base Walk](#)** This is a big walk (10.6kms, 3½ hours) and how much you do will depend on the time available that you have, your level of fitness and the weather. The rangers suggest starting early morning from the Mala Walk car park and going clockwise, staying cool, taking lots of water and finishing by 11.00am to avoid the heat. Alternatively you can do just one or two of the five sections that comprise the walk.
- **[Uluru Base Drive](#)** – A well-maintained bitumen road goes right around Uluru, reasonably close to the rock (14kms easy driving). As a general introduction to Uluru, why not start at the Cultural Centre and then drive clockwise to stop at the Mala Walk Car Park, Kuniya Piti car park at the far end of the rock, and Kuniya Car Park halfway back to the Cultural Centre?

(c) At Kata Tjuta

- **[Kata Tjuta](#)** – Why not drive out to Kata Tjuta for morning tea or a picnic lunch, stopping at either the Sunset Viewing Area, Walpa Gorge Car Park or Valley of the Winds Car Park (or all three)?
- **[Walpa Gorge Walk](#)** (2.6km/1 hour return, moderate grade) This walk is definitely one of our family favourites. From the car park you gradually walk up the gorge on a clearly marked track to a large quiet pool, where you can go no further. Along the way there are several park benches where you can stop for a break. Walpa Gorge Car Park is 51kms (37-42 mins) from Yulara, depending on the traffic.
- **[Valley of the Winds Walk](#)** Alternatively there's the much more challenging Valley of the Winds Walk. "The Valley of the Winds Walk lets visitors immerse



Walpa Gorge Walk

themselves among Kata Tjuta's domes. It also features unparalleled views of the spectacular Mars-like landscape surrounding Kata Tjuta from two lookout points along the track. This walk is classed as Grade 4. It is steep, rocky and difficult in places, so please be careful and take your time."

There are three options: (a) clamber up to the first viewing point called the Karu Lookout (2.2km/1hr return) "The track to the first lookout is moderately difficult and has some loose rocks to negotiate. However, the views from the lookout are absolutely jaw-dropping.", or (b) continue on to the Karingana Lookout (4.5kms/2.5hrs return) "The track to the Karingana lookout takes you down into the valley and creek beds. It is challenging in sections with many steps and some steep spots.", or (c) do the full circuit walk (7.4kms/4hrs return) "Doing the full circuit is actually easier than walking to the second lookout (Karingana) and returning."

While my wife and I have done the full circuit in earlier years, we are now 70+ and much more aware of the impacts of a broken ankle (or worse) as a result of a fall. The 'walk' from the car park to the first lookout has several hundred metres of large loose boulders and rock rubble that we just weren't prepared to tackle last year.

In addition, please don't forget that the Valley of the Winds can be scorching hot, and therefore you definitely need to go prepared with lots of water etc. In addition, the national park rangers close the walk at mid-morning whenever the temperature is expected to go above 36°.

- [Kata Tjuta Sunset](#) Why not view the brilliant colours of Kata Tjuta at sunset? Even if you've already seen an Uluru sunset, a Kata Tjuta sunset is also so very special, and you're also so much closer at Kata Tjuta than at Uluru. Why not take a picnic tea or cheese and biccies to counter those hunger pangs, but also please be aware that you must be out of the national park by closing time. Kata Tjuta carpark has toilets, under-cover picnic tables and water. From Yulara to the Sunset Viewing Area takes 37-50 mins (51kms). Expect lots of people during peak times.
- [Kata Tjuta Sunrise \(Kata Tjuta Dune Viewing Area\)](#)
"Gorgeous at sunrise, sunset and anytime in between, the dune viewing area lets you experience the vast space and colours of the Australian desert. Explore the tracks to find your own sunrise spot, have a picnic under our shelters or watch a sunset without the crowds." From Yulara to the viewing platform takes 26-40 mins (35km). Please note that because the sun doesn't shine directly onto the rock domes in front of the viewing platform, they do appear very dark. In my opinion the best time to stop for a photo is mid-morning.



Two very useful websites to start your exploration

- [Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park](#)
- [Ayers Rock Resort](#)



Contributor details

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Brian was Principal of Auburn GHS (1992-2002), NSWSPC Futures Principal (2003), Secondary Principal seconded to the Secondary Education Directorate (2004-2005) and Principal Liaison Officer Strategic Initiatives Directorate/Student Engagement Directorate (2006-2009). He is a Life Member of the NSWSPC and is also the coordinator of the NSWSPC Retired Principals' Network and NSWSPC Principal Futures Website.