

On the Selection of a Vice-Chancellor at the University of Tasmania

At the end of the interviews in Hobart I offered some thoughts on the context and the field. If I had written it all down it might have looked rather like what follows.

Context

All universities in Australia, and most in countries like ours, are relatively anxious about the future, for much the same reasons. Money is always a problem; governments fluctuate between over-regulating and deregulating; there is little confidence about the future; university staff are not as well-paid, relatively speaking, as they once were; there are greater demands on and expectations of them; the world is much more competitive than it was; and so on.

In such a context it is important to keep spirits up and confidence strong, and there are good reasons to do so. There are no serious competitors for what the universities do; universities are now in the mainstream of life, not on the edge of society; they are moving into a time of partnerships; larger and larger proportions of our society see a university education as essential for themselves and for their children and grandchildren; and so on. No university is going to be shut down; none will go bankrupt in any real sense.

The much faster communications and technological links in our society mean that if something bad is going to occur to universities it will occur to them all at much the same time rather than just to one or two. In the same fashion, all universities are much better now than they were in the mid 1980s — better in research, in teaching, in engagement with their communities, in planning, in managing. So be confident! The University of Tasmania has done well, and will continue to do well. Do not see the competition in which all universities are placed as a 'zero sum' game (that is, that some universities can only win at the expense of the other universities that lose). We are all winning in some respects and losing in others, but the winning is more important and more lasting.

At the same time, recognise that no one much loves or values universities in the way that university people feel they ought. As in the case of hospitals, the judicial system, airlines and so on, people outside the walls take the existence of universities for granted, and don't feel much need to worry about them. It follows that those running universities need to be clear about their own responsibility to guide the destiny of their institution, and not rely on governments, alumni or anyone else. Planning must start at home, whatever governments propose — governments change and have very short memories, but universities are long-lived institutions.

Australia is around third from the bottom in the OECD set of 28 developed countries in the extent to which it raises public revenue. We were once close to the top. There is plainly a good deal of capacity to increase taxation and spend

more. But neither side of politics is proposing to do it. Indeed, the emphasis is now on reducing taxation further. Waiting for the pendulum to turn is a possibility, but we may have to wait a long time. In the meantime, there are salaries to pay and buildings to maintain...

Thinking Forward

The University of Tasmania is unique but not special. One could say the same of any university in our country. UTas is the best university in the State, and could be made better still. There are many universities that have comparable situations and comparable problems, both in Australia and outside it. It would seem to me better to concentrate on being the world's best University of Tasmania than to ape other universities that have different settings. I do not regard the Go8 universities as 'the best' or even as especially important. Their grouping is a piece of self-selection and is supported (a) by assiduous PR and (b) by the fact that many of Australia's notables in politics and business were educated in them.

But in universities we are (or should be) always building for the future. In fifty (a hundred, two hundred) years' time there will be significant changes in the status order. Just as Sydney and Melbourne have had to move over to accommodate UNSW and Monash (which are not much more than 40 years old), so in time will the system adjust to the upward shifts of Macquarie, Canberra, Flinders, and others. Status standards will change as our society changes. At the moment, they are a mixture of age of foundation, relative wealth and research prowess. It is important to note that most high-performing students go to other universities than the Go8 bunch, and that entry levels at the bottom end of the scale can be very low in the Go8 set (that is, it has been easier to enter the University of Sydney in Arts and Science than in many other universities which are not in the Go8. Students can enter the ANU with lower entry scores than would be accepted in the University of Canberra. And so on.

The University of Tasmania is largely responsible for the quality of the professional infrastructure of the State, that is, the quality of the training, confidence and moral attitude of those who use their knowledge in the interests of the community. Its main task is to improve that quality, and what goes with that task — the expansion and distillation of knowledge, the development of education of all kinds and the enhancement of the creativity of the community. In short, research is an important adjunct of the University's main purpose, not the main purpose itself. To this end it would seem sensible to forge links with universities in other parts of the world that have comparable settings and interests. Of course one should not neglect Australian counterparts too.

Island nations and societies are 'insular' by definition, and it is important to look and think outwardly, not inwardly. I would ask all the heads of schools to set out for me the three counterparts schools/departments in Australia whose curricula and standing they admire, and then ask them what they are doing to bring their own work up to that level (always assuming that it is below!) Along with that, the University should charge international students properly for its courses, not try to compete on price. To follow the latter course is indicative of a

lack of confidence and pride in what one does. I would see no harm in undertaking two or three offshore endeavours, as long as they were of modest scale and risk. To do so will expose staff to other countries, other universities, other possibilities and other ways, and is good for their self-confidence. We need to take some risks, because we learn from errors, not from successes. The culture of the University needs to become forward looking, outward looking, engaged with the world, and prepared to try new things and new ways. Yes, mistakes will be made, but provided people learn from them, that is a good way forward.

What Vice-Chancellors are For

The Vice-Chancellor of most Australian universities has a huge capacity to affect the direction and priorities of the University during his/her term, to represent the University externally in every conceivable context, and to lead, inspire, persuade, cajole the University's staff. The Vice-Chancellor has externally to represent and stand up for everyone, and internally to protect staff against students, students against staff, general staff against academic staff, juniors against seniors, and so on. It is a multi-faceted, protean role, and no one can possibly do all of it well all of the time.

In my view it is important for the Vice-Chancellor to understand the culture of the University and then to move it in the direction that is thought most productive. Most university staff are wedded to the ways they already do things, and see no real need to change them. They are trained in critique, and can find many plausible ways to show that what is sought is wrong, misconceived, impracticable, over-theoretical, under-theoretical or whatever. To change structures is sometimes necessary for economic reasons, but it is unlikely to change cultures: that has to be done through leadership, not through shifting deck chairs. Nor is it something that can be delegated or devolved: it has to come from the top and be supported by all those at the top.

Universities ought to be in a state of tension most of the time, because creative institutions use tension effectively. But too much tension will be counter-productive and distract people from their real work, which is education and what supports good education. Judging how much tension is enough is a matter for the Vice-Chancellor, who can reduce the level by doing little and rocking few boats. That is OK in the short run by not in long run. It is sadly the case that good long-term planning will involve difficulties well before anyone has tasted the fruits of success. Again, it is the job of a Vice-Chancellor to lead the long-term planning, and he or she will need to be able to withstand the flak that will inevitably come.

It is a lonely job, because the Vice-Chancellor cannot make confidants of his/her subordinates without setting up a 'kitchen cabinet' or a crony system whose effect is to vitiate all the good things that are done. The AVCC's main purpose, in my view, is to establish a system whereby vice-chancellors can talk to their peers without having to hold back (and, of course, to listen sympathetically to others doing the same). Vice-Chancellors need a strong sense of agenda (what would I do if I were VC?) before they undertake the job, good health, emotional

resilience and an inner self-confidence that is soundly based on having done difficult things in the past and learned from them. I would add that it is better that they be Rousseauian than Hobbesian, that is to say, that they trust people rather than suspect them. Life is short, as Hobbes said, and a Vice-Chancellor will in my view get more out of his/her staff and students if s/he inspires and trusts them rather than worries about their getting away with things.

The field

The field is a perfectly good one, and the remaining three candidates are all of excellent quality, with a lot of experience, savvy and enthusiasm. I do not believe that the Committee can make a serious mistake in appointing any one of them. But of course each will undertake the role in a different way, and with different outcomes for the University. At the next round it will be important to decide, among other things, just what are the most desired outcomes, and which candidate is most likely to produce them.

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