

## Vice-Chancellor's Article for *Monitor*

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### 'Quality and Quantity

In 1996 the higher education system learned from the new Commonwealth Government that it was going to give up 6 per cent of Commonwealth outlays to avoid an otherwise large Budget deficit. The money was to be taken over four years, as a reduction in postgraduate coursework numbers.

You will note in passing that this is the last year of a the reductions in Commonwealth grant, and that although we are back into Commonwealth budgets in surplus there has been no suggestion that outlays for higher education ought to be increased again. I retain the suspicion that the 6 per reduction was imposed principally to shock higher education into learning how to look after itself, rather than always to rely on public funding.

Be that as it may, the outcome has been an enormous growth in 'enterprise' across the higher education system. University of Canberra staff now teach in half a dozen countries overseas, deliver a great range of postgraduate courses to fee-paying customers, and form effective links with organisations which want their staff trained in areas in which we are expert. Despite the Asian economic woes, there has been a great increase in the numbers of foreign students studying in Australia or being taught by Australian teachers at home.

These changes put many of us in a quandary. As a social democrat, I see the origin of all this activity in the reluctance of Australians to pay more in taxation, and thereby to support the public side of Australian life. Australia, along with Turkey, Japan and the US, is at the bottom of the OECD league table in terms of the proportion that public expenditure makes of GDP. I believe that we could have a better and fairer society if we taxed ourselves more and were more concerned about equalising life chances.

As a vice-chancellor, I have to find the money to pay the bills. The Commonwealth now provides about 40 per cent of our expenditure, and student fees of all kinds, including HECS, make up much of the balance. So I have to become an entrepreneur, looking always for the opportunity for a new endeavour that will add to our revenue, and supporting those who make those new endeavours possible.

For me this is new territory, just as it is for those of you who find yourselves teaching in contexts that were unknown a few years ago. We all have had a lot of learning to do.

And there is a rub (which Brewer tells me is a metaphor from lawn bowls — the rub being an impediment facing you when you wish to deliver your bowl). The impediment is twofold: one is that we are not awash with talented staff who can deliver all the programs which are available to us; the other is that we have to be careful not to imperil the quality of what we do in the search for more business.

We do not have 150 years of tradition, and not conspicuously endowed with sandstone, let alone ivy. But we do have a high reputation for quality of education

both in design and in delivery. We have to protect that reputation, and that means we have to guard and improve that quality.

For me this is a rub between a rock and a hard place. I want the University to increase its new business, because this is the only source for the money to pay increased salaries and to appoint new staff and to purchase new equipment. But I don't want new business at the cost of the quality of what we do. That is to get a short-term gain at a long-term cost.

And from this quandary comes a request to you all: let us recognise that this new environment is here for at least some time. There is simply no sign of increased public funding, but we need to grow by two or three per cent every year just to pay increments, support promotions, deal with increased Internet and copyright charges, and generally prepare for cost increases where we cannot control the context.

So we all have to adjust to being interested in new business. At the same time, the new business has to be of high quality, and that means we have to be no less interested in quality control, especially if the new business is overseas. Do we know a lot about that kind of quality control? No, but we are learning quickly.

We are learning to decline opportunities, to say No where we think that the quality of what we are being asked to do will not be sufficient, or where the reward to the University is also insufficient. In my view the twin imperatives of new business and quality control should concern everyone, and I look forward to enriched discussions of the issues involved at School, Divisional and University levels.