

HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS

*The last submission ATEM made to a government inquiry was described in that report as 'circumspect'. This ATEM submission to the **Higher Education at the Crossroads Review** has therefore been written in a slightly more provocative way in attempt to highlight some key issues:*

- *recognition of expertise that administrators hold;*
- *the contribution of administrators to universities generally;*
- *the contribution of administrators to the learning experience specifically; and*
- *the need for a re-think about how staff in universities are employed, recognised and rewarded.*

While the submission has already gone in, any comments or thoughts are always welcome (send to me at mconway@swin.edu.au), as they provide input for the continuing conversation we are having about these issues.

MAREE CONWAY, PRESIDENT

SUMMARY

It is time that government and institutions recognised that their “staff” are not exclusively academic. For universities to run well, and for the quality of learning, teaching and research to improve into the future, the skills, knowledge and contributions of all staff, both academic and general, need to be recognised and developed.

Successive Australian governments have conducted numerous reviews of higher education. All of those government reviews have ignored or paid lip service to general staff and their contribution to universities.

This submission by the Association for Tertiary Education Management Inc (ATEM) recommends that an outcome of Crossroads should be recognition of the need to do some basic work on the classification of staff in Australian universities, along with a re-thinking of the way work is carried out, and by whom.

TERMINOLOGY

Attention needs to be paid to terminology. In Crossroads, **staff** usually means “academic staff”, although the authors are compelled to include in brackets words to the effect of “including general staff” where they think they might have to in order to be political correct. If ‘staff’ is meant to be an inclusive term, that should be stated, because the use of the term in Crossroads clearly refers to academic staff, who are in the minority in terms of the total staff population in Australian higher education.

The term ‘general staff’, or the more derogatory ‘non-academic staff’, is currently used by government and most institutions to classify all staff not employed on academic teaching and research classifications. There are many sub-groups of general staff, all of which make significant contributions to the quality of universities – the problem is that most of

these staff are not visible in the organisation and are therefore easily ignored. General staff are now the majority in Australian higher education institutions, and an effort needs to be made to understand who they are, and to classify them into more relevant and meaningful categories.

This submission focuses on administrators, who are but one sub-group of general staff.

Management and **governance** mean two different things in the 21st century university. They are two sets of activities that used to be undertaken by academics, but no longer. When we refer to Vice-Chancellors and the like, and decisions they make to set strategic directions or to decide institutional policy, we should talk about institutional leadership and governance, which is primarily an academic activity. When we are referring to the multitude of functions and tasks needed to ensure the university runs on a day-to-day basis, we are referring to management, which is now primarily an administrative activity. It is an insult to the majority of staff in Australian higher education institutions to be continually lost in the terminology morass. It is time to recognise the difference.

SOME GENERAL COMMENTS

The Crossroads discussion paper indicates that “Australian higher education institutions have been characterised by significant changes in management practice over the past 10 years”. ATEM contends that significant change has in fact been occurring to management practice since the mid-1970s, which has culminated in the last 10 years in the perceived move from collegial to corporate governance (note, governance NOT management). Part of the significant change is the emergence of the professional university administrator, and their growing role in university management (note, management NOT governance). The overt manifestation of change has been the rise of corporate management and, since that attacks so many cherished academic values, the parallel rise of the professional administrator and its impact on universities has, more or less, been invisible. It is time to make the invisible visible.

If universities are “to establish environments that promote effective learning and scholarship”, they will need to take into account all the staff who produce that environment. Universities cannot become more “student focussed” and make “significant improvements in student

support services” without the involvement, commitment and expertise of administrative staff. If there is to be a “renewed focus on the centrality of learning”, we first need to recognise that the learning experience is now more than just an academic activity. There is an administrative component to the learning experience, and we need to spend some time working out how administrators contribute, and how they can complement and support the work already being done to improve the academic learning experience.

In the Opportunities and Challenges section of Crossroads, we have the comment “these developments are also changing aspects of academic work”. True enough. These same developments are **ALSO** changing administrative work, and how those changes impact on academic work need to be considered as well. There is an internal as well as an external change dimension here, and both need to be addressed if universities are to move forward.

CONSULTATIVE QUESTIONS

ATEM has provided some ideas in response to some consultative questions that lie within its field of interest and activity.

How can staffing productivity (both general and academic) be increased and monitored?

Productivity is one outcome of motivated staff. It is difficult for administrators to be motivated in an environment where their worth is ignored. If staffing productivity is to be increased generally, the first step is recognition of the roles of **all** the staff who work in universities. The next is to provide the support and training required to ensure they can carry out those roles successfully.

How can universities' administrative processes be made more efficient?

By asking administrators how they would improve them and by involving administrators in decision making about changes to processes they manage. Administrative processes are going to change continuously as universities deal with external forces. The only way to ensure that those processes meet the needs of the university and are efficient is to involve the staff who do the jobs in the discussion as equals. A PhD does not provide expertise to decide how an administrative process should be run, just as an MBA does not qualify an administrator to teach. We need to recognise expertise of staff for different functions and use that expertise accordingly.

What scope is there for greater collaboration between higher education institutions in academic and administrative areas?

There is significant scope for greater collaboration. The networking benefit of ATEM means that administrators across Australasia are already in contact with each other, and are already sharing best practice in professional development programs and at the annual Association conference. ATEM members are in an excellent position to make such collaboration happen in reality. Collaboration brings with it its own set of pressures and tensions, however, and these would need to be addressed to ensure that the end goal of a better higher education system is kept in focus.

What forms of staffing flexibility do universities need?

It is a truism that "Australian universities need to be able to attract and retain top quality staff and students", as is the statement that "universities are having difficulty attracting and retaining quality staff". Apart from the now standard flexible arrangements in terms of remuneration and working environments, some re-thinking of industrial awards is needed to address these issues.

Universities need to be able to appoint staff to classifications depending on their knowledge, skills and expertise to contribute to the total learning experience, not because they do or do not teach. A single industrial award with a new range of classifications is needed that allows a university to recognise its particular context, while ensuring that **all** staff, irrespective of original professional training, receive the reward, recognition and professional development they need to create an exciting learning environment.

How can performance management, and recognition or reward of individual and team achievement, be improved?

A single, targeted professional development program that addresses the management needs of institutions and is open to all university managers is a start. The skills and knowledge needed to manage a university are the same irrespective of whether the staff

member is classified as an academic or an administrator. Groups like ATEM and the AVCC should work together to offer comprehensive, sector-wide professional development programs for all staff involved in the management of universities.

If universities, as the Crossroads report suggests, need to “recognise that they too are businesses” one needs to recognise equally that businesses usually are not run by academics but by expert managers whose job it is to keep the business viable. There is nothing different in this respect in terms of universities. The academic role has changed to such an extent where they cannot manage universities anymore, but they do not yet trust administrators to carry out that task on their behalf.

Academics and administrators exist as two professional groups in universities, and they operate in parallel and in isolation from one another. This is a state of affairs sustained by separate industrial awards and differential reward and recognition staffing policies. The present environment where rewards and recognition depend on classification (eg promotions and study leave as a right for academics but not generally for administrators) exacerbates the tension and lack of trust that now exists between the two groups.

Staff need to be managed, recognised and rewarded on the basis of how well they contribute to the goals of a university, and to the learning experience. We might then see a declining of the tension and the staff effort and time now required to deal with that tension, and an increasing and converging focus on the future of the university.

What are the capabilities required of university top managers?

First we have to recognise that capabilities required to be a top manager do not automatically come with a PhD. Understanding an academic institution and how it runs might come with a PhD, but that understanding can be learned through a carefully planned career path for administrators as well. Being a top university manager does not mean you have to be an academic, but it does mean you have to understand academic institutions and how they work.

ATEM is developing a Professional Development Framework (PDF) that specifies these capabilities. This Framework can then be used to underpin professional development programs run by ATEM and by institutions, and used by individuals to develop a personal career development plan. The aim of the PDF is to promote high quality professional practice to contribute to the effective management of universities. It could be a starting point for considering and formalising capabilities required of university managers, and ATEM would be happy to have a discussion about this possibility.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Universities are indeed at a crossroads. As they transform their shape yet again, and move into a new paradigm of learning and teaching, it is the perfect opportunity to consider the staffing arrangements required to make that new paradigm productive, and the staff qualities needed to create an effective learning relationship with students.

There are a number of external forces driving the transformation of universities. We can have any number of educational reforms that, on the surface, will look like they are moving us to the new paradigm. But, unless internal tensions and pressures within institutions are addressed, this vital transformation of universities will not succeed.

Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, there is now more to the learning and teaching experience, and more to the running of universities, than academic staff and their work. The silence in public forums and reports about the role of administrative staff in universities is deafening. The only time any research is done on their role is when a survey of academic staff raises the idea that there might be tension between academics and administrators, or when

the emergence of a quasi-academic staff group suggests previously accepted academic and administrative work boundaries might be blurring. This type of research deals with the visible, surface trends and events, rather than the underlying issues and forces driving the long term transformation of universities. What needs to be researched is the idea that what is blurring is not the work, but the goals and values of academics and administrators. We need to explore how that is happening and what the long term implications are for how work is conducted in universities, and for the learning experience.

If the Crossroads review is about opening up options for higher education in Australia, then the review must be brave, and look to the long term future rather than just dealing with short term imperatives. For Australian higher education to survive and thrive in the 21st century all its staff need to be taken into account. It is time to acknowledge that administrators are a professional group of staff who, while they may not use an academic benchmark to classify their worth, can make an incredibly valuable and essential contribution to universities. Not only can, but want to.

We have a real opportunity to move beyond the old stereotypes, and look to the future with a clean sheet of paper in front of us. We can create an exciting university if we can rid ourselves of antiquated worldviews about what should be, and what can be. We have the chance to re-write the rulebook here, and ATEM stands prepared to wield the pen. The question is will this government, unlike its predecessors, be brave enough to take up the challenge?

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*Submission authorised by Association Executive Committee
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