

The first Boilerhouse Address
7 March 2001

by Professor Don Aitkin
Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra

'The year of our people'

The last few years have been extraordinarily important, extraordinarily successful and extraordinarily tiring. As your Vice-Chancellor I have been conscious throughout that I have been asking you all to try harder, to do with less, to wear new organisational clothing, to think laterally, to explore new markets, to raise our quality levels, and so on. And you have done it, and the outcomes have been good ones.

This year begins with yet another increase in the median entry level for UC students (it is now around 85 — I'll have the exact figure after the March 31st census where we report to the Commonwealth on the admissions outcomes). We now have very few marginally funded students, which means that in efficiency terms we are running very well. We finished 2000 with a useful budgetary surplus, which we will re-invest in the University to improve our capital stock and our capacity to do what we do even better. We are on track for the second 3 per cent salary increase in July that was part of our Enterprise Agreement in 2000. If you were at Commencement at the end of January you will have noticed that I welcomed about 120 new staff, the largest number for very many years. We have begun to grow again.

All that is good, and if you are a regular attender at these occasions you'll probably be thinking that I seem to say something like this every year. And to some degree I do, because each year we do move forward. But during last year I began to formulate a phrase to describe what I would like to do this year, as the person who steers the University through time. I began to see 2001 as 'the year of our people', and I tried it out on Lois Jennings, who liked it and urged me to keep going down that path.

What I had in mind was that there had to come a point when I stopped focussing on where the ship was going and focussed instead on the crew, if you will forgive the nautical metaphor. I feel that those of you who have been here for the last several years have worked very hard and often under great pressure. There is a lot of tension surrounding higher education, and we no longer have the security that was once part of our situation. We know very well that we have to earn most of our money. To give it in a nutshell: sometime this year we will pass \$100 million in annual expenditure. Of that total some \$37 million will come as the recurrent grant from the Commonwealth, about \$23 million will come from HECS payments, both directly and from the trust fund, and \$40 million we will have to earn. We will earn it, and that will involve many of you in working in ways that might have seemed quite bizarre ten years ago. But we will do it, and we will do it well.

So I kept thinking of how I might influence things so that you felt better about being a member of the University of Canberra. I can't add a nought to

everyone's annual income, and even if I could, there is abundant evidence that people are not wholly fixated on their salary. People like working in an organisation when they feel that it values them, and they do not quickly leave such an organisation even when they could earn rather more money outside. What is more, in the case of this University, we had just successfully negotiated a 12 per cent salary increase over three to four years, so whatever I was looking for had to be more than just money.

Over the year I came to develop a series of ideas about a better way of doing things. I was prompted in part by working with senior colleagues and the union on the issue of academic workloads. Talking with my Deputy, Meredith Edwards, about mental and physical well-being and their importance in a large organisation prompted me also. I was prompted also by the annual cycle of feedback and goal-setting which is now a regular part of the work of the University's senior managers. It seemed to me that there were several things I could do that would materially improve the working life of the University, and that in 2001 I should pull them together and articulate them as a kind of collective general policy in what I was beginning to see as 'the year of our people'. So here is that general policy, and its bits.

I have to say at once that it will be several months before it is all in place. The financial side of it is important, and has to be budgeted for. Some of it is here now, some you may have heard of, and some is new. Its point is two-fold. First, the University accepts some responsibility for the working conditions of its staff for the best of all possible reasons: the better the working conditions, the more productive the staff are likely to be. Second, prevention is always better than cure: if we can fix something up in advance, that is likely to be a better outcome in all respects than waiting until we have a real live problem and fixing it then. Let me then outline the bits of the policy, in no particular order.

1. Mental Well-being

I start with something that has been in place for more than a year, and has been most useful to those who have availed themselves of it. I refer to the 'Employee Assistance Program'. I don't think the EAP is as widely known as it could be, though we have done our best to make it widely accessible. In essence, it provides an opportunity for counselling for people who feel that they would benefit from it – at its simplest, someone to talk to about something that is bugging them. The discussion takes place off the campus, and the someone you talk to is not a University person but an independent professional. You don't pay anything.

The something that is bugging you doesn't have to be a problem about work. It could be about family, or finances, or a friend. The point is that the opportunity is there. The University does not know who is using the service, or what the subject of the counselling is. We pay an annual fee to cover everyone, and all we learn is how many people used the service, and the most general statistics about subject-matter — which enable me to tell you that those who used the service were prompted to do so by worries and family and finances. I believe that the EAP is a most worthwhile service for our people, and I encourage you to find out about it, and use it if you feel the need.

2. Physical Well-being

From peace of mind I move to physical well-being. There is ample evidence that people who are in good physical condition are, in comparison to those who are not, happier, more alert, more productive and less inclined to illness and to absences from work. Very many organisations have physical fitness programs, and they find that these programs help to reduce workers compensation premiums as well as simply raise the enjoyment level of the staff. I am aware that there are medical and hospital insurance association plans that in part reimburse people who maintain a consistent level of physical activity. Canberra is well supplied with sporting facilities of all kinds, and we have our own facilities that are the responsibility of the University of Canberra Union.

I am developing such a plan for the staff of the University of Canberra. There will be a variety of options, and for each of them the University will subsidise some of the cost of regular and sustained participation by a staff member.

3. Improving Qualifications and Building a Career

My third area is that of improving the mind, one's qualifications and one's career. The University has a capacity that non-university organisations do not have: we can offer our staff the opportunity of developing their skills and qualifications while they are on the job, and the qualification is one of our own. I see this as an important area to develop for some obvious reasons. One is that we are too small an organisation to offer everyone a career path for the whole of a working life. More positively, we are widely known to be a good place to work, and a good entry to have on one's c.v. In fact, like the ABC, which does virtually all the practical training in radio and television within that industry, we are a kind of nursery, preparing many of our staff, not simply our students, for careers elsewhere. A second good reason is that in a highly mobile labour market we could benefit from having available an important inducement for staff member to stay, while he or she completes a university degree.

In December last year I asked Council for permission to charge fees where staff were enrolled in approved courses within the University. I did this so that the University would not be involved both in paying for HECS places and then in addition paying a fringe benefit tax because we were providing a benefit to our staff by paying for their study. Council has agreed, and we have begun work on developing the policy. It is more complicated than I first thought, but I hope to have it ready for implementation in second semester. In essence, a staff member enrolled in a course that has been approved by his or her Division will pay no fees provided the unit is passed — a common provision in organisations that send their staff to us. When the policy is up and running I will discuss with my counterparts in other Canberra tertiary education institutions whether or not they would be interested in generalising it, so that a staff member at any of the institutions could enrol in an approved course at any of Canberra's tertiary institutions, with the cost paid for by the staff member's employer.

4. Communication

For much of my time here I have worked on the rule that the three most important rules for a vice-chancellor are 'communicate, communicate and communicate' (although at the moment I think the rules are 'quality, quality and quality'). I must say that I find communication a vexing matter. We live in an age of information overload, and I am as skilled as anyone here in deleting messages I don't wish to receive. As the University's chief executive officer I am obliged to publish staff notices, and annual reminders and new rules on hiring or parking or smoking (the latter seems to have been read by no one who smokes). The sheer volume of information passing around our system is itself a problem. Sometimes I help to generate it: for example, I have tried for a long time to get people to understand how the University organises its Budget, and have come to the view that for many it is simpler not to try to understand, and lack of understanding does permit criticism.

Nonetheless, I am finding that the email system can be used effectively as a source of advice and comment. I have received around 40 messages about music on campus, all but one of them thoughtful, constructive and personal. It made me realise how important music actually is for many people in the University. A year ago I used the system to see what people thought about the merits of starting the year early and thereby extending the mid-semester break. Again I received 40 or more responses, and they were overwhelmingly in favour of the early start. So I acted in that direction. I think that system can be used more widely, and I am thinking about how to do that.

In addition, I want to involve you all in the first of what I hope will be an annual survey of the level of satisfaction within the University about what we do and how we do it. The first one will serve as a benchmark, although we could ask one of the universities that have already gone down this track, like QUT, to let us have a peek at their results so we knew what to expect. I'm not thinking of a popularity poll. The information that we would collect would have to be useful in helping us deal with problems and thereby lift both our performance and the satisfaction that people have in their jobs, their colleagues and their working environment. I know that the Council of the University will be most interested in the outcomes of such a survey. It would be my intention that the results would be public within the University. Although survey design and analysis were once my trade and skill, this is something on which the University would seek expert assistance.

5. The Organisation of Work

For the last two years and more I have been thinking about and involved in a consideration of the changes to the ordinary work of University people, and what might be done about it. For all universities in Australia, and for nearly all outside it, the last ten years have seen a profound change in university life. In brief, enrolments are much larger, money is less available, new technologies have changed traditional methods and relationships, and there is much less security for the university and the people for whom it is their working life. All my address to you in the last ten years have had this theme in one form or another, and this one is no exception.

In partnership with the UC Branch of the NTEU a few of my senior colleagues and I worked purposefully in 1999 and 2000 to develop an academic workloads policy which I have asked Schools and Heads of Schools to give a fair trial to. A consideration of comparable issues with respect to general staff members was part of our Enterprise Agreement, and we have started discussion with the NTEU about that issue. I am sure that the processes the University and the Union used so successfully will show their merit again. I would like to say again how much I valued the co-operation of the Union in this long and important discussion. These matters will continue to be important as far ahead as anyone can see.

I would also like to say that in the time I have been here I have worked and acted wherever I could to reduce the distinctions which apply in our day to day life between academic and general staff. They are much fewer in number than when I came, but they still exist. I have asked the University's General Staff Committee to develop a strategy for itself that will assist me to keep moving in this direction. I have discovered that vice-chancellors, who are nearly all former academics, tend to take the side of their general staff in the wrangles that do occur from time to time about who should do what and be responsible to whom. I work very closely with our general staff members and greatly value the work they do. My view of our relative importance is that the students come first, both historically and in practice. Without them, none of us would have a job. With them, all of us have roles that I regard as equally important and as equally deserving of respect. As Karl Dubravs reminds me, I can afford to be impartial here, because under the Enterprise Agreement I am neither an academic nor a general staff member!