

Vice-Chancellor's Article for *Monitor*

31 August 2000

'Thirty Years After'

I would like to thank all those, especially Karin Oldfield and Eugene Clark, who did so much to make the 30-year celebrations such a success. The whole sequence of events was of course aimed at our community rather than ourselves. All successful organisations tend to be taken for granted by their communities. They are fixtures, part of the predictable present and desired future. Yet, as we know very well, we have to work much harder than we once did just to have a desired future, and we need community support, not just goodwill, to make that occur.

My real knowledge of the University came only when I was appointed Vice-Chancellor ten years ago. I had given guest lectures here to Political Science classes in the early 1970s, and played squash racquets on the College courts, but otherwise I knew CCAE only by reputation. The reputation was a good one. It did different things to the older universities, and it did them well. 'The 'College of Knowledge' label was never used disparagingly, at least to me, and there was a lot of affection displayed towards it.

I picked up a lot of that again at the Reunion lunch, which began the week of the 30-year celebrations. So many of the 300 or so people there told me how important the education they received here had been to them. So many more told me that their children had also come here, and were doing well. All were excited by the beauty of the campus, and told me of how dusty/windy/muddy it had been in the old days.

The goodwill was simply enormous. In my remarks at the lunch I said that one of the real observers of Australian higher education had remarked that the University of Canberra had made the transition from college to university with the least splash of all — meaning that it had in fact been a university all along. I went on to say that in the eleven years since the transition we had made a huge amount of ground within the system. In 2005 we will stand scrutiny as providers of the best undergraduate and postgraduate courses for people who wish to enter the professions or advance in them. No one there doubted that we could do it.

Another remark of that time was that the University of Canberra was the only one of the new universities which needed neither to apologise for nor to boast about its past. I interpreted that mildly Delphic remark to mean that the university that had undergone a change of name rather than an amalgamation and once again that we had the right origins for our present status.

In essentials what makes us distinctive now is still what made us distinctive then. Perhaps I am too close to it all, but what strikes me as important here are the centrality of teaching and learning, and the feeling that our students are very important, rather than distractions from our 'real' work. I don't want to undervalue research and scholarship, but in my experience once an academic becomes transfixed by how important his/her research is, students can easily appear as distractions, and relations with them can become short-term and a little strained.

Generalisations like this one are dangerous, and I have known many academics who managed the balance between the varying demands of teaching, research and administration, and whose students thought they were great. I would like to think that that I was one such myself during the 1970s, when managing that combination was a daily and sometimes despairing struggle. But I often visit other universities, and I read their newspapers regularly. I think we are different, and so too do people from elsewhere. From time to time I describe UC as a member of the 'Group of One'. It is a bit of a dig at the pretentious, but it also says that we are distinctive, and that we are confident that what we are doing is good and will prosper.

I think UC has a culture that puts students and teaching first, and I am sure that it inherited this culture from CCAE. I believe that culture will be a major element in the distinctiveness of the University in the future. Our concentration on the quality of our academic programs and on the quality of the experience our students have is part of that culture.

The years ahead will be exciting ones, and no-one needs to be told that they will be years of hard work. But the 30-year celebrations reminded me that we have friends everywhere, and they like to see our success. They like to see us taking on the bigger boys and doing it well. Above all, they like what they see. And for that, again, my thanks.