

Vice-Chancellor's Article for *Monitor*

4 May 2000

'The Centrality of Research'

The Research Summit held at the beginning of the month was a good indication of how central 'research' is to the self-identification of contemporary academics. I counted nearly 100 staff in the Union Theatre in the morning session — between a quarter and a third of our academic company. It was a good day, with lively talk and spirited disagreement, and an excellent start to what will be an important process of culture change, not just here but in other universities.

What is at stake is how status and esteem are earned in universities. For the past half-century the easiest route has been what might be called 'research productivity', which has various styles according to discipline and field, but is essentially the production of published knowledge.

I think that we are going to see a trend towards a plurality of routes, though the search for status and esteem will not disappear, whatever the yearnings of those who would like to see the university as a college of equal intellects. Ten years ago I wrote that 'the organisation of research, with its prize system, from the Nobel down through fellowships of learned academies, medals, prizes, invitations to give lectures, honorary degrees and the rest, is explicable only if academics are driven by the need to be esteemed. And within the higher education system only one element of life and work is organised to attract esteem — and that is research'.

I thought (and still think) that the dominance of research 'is seriously at odds with the reality of the modern university, and that a more sensible and more humane reward system needs to be developed quickly'.

At the levels of the system, the university and the department or school, we pay conventional research productivity too much attention, and take too little notice of other forms of contribution. One reason is that there has been a good deal of other people's money to support research productivity, and another is that 'curiosity-led' research supported by other people's money allows us to situate ourselves in the 19th century Romantic category of the 'creative genius' who must be allowed considerable freedom of movement and not trammelled in any way lest the outpourings of genius be quenched.

It is plain that our principal funder, the Commonwealth Government, has come to have different views, and like it or not, we have to take notice of them. The Commonwealth no longer accepts the curiosity-led, creative genius view of research, and wants our endeavours coupled more closely to real and existing problems of all kinds.

That looks like, at least to some, an infringement of academic freedom, or a system likely to lead to conflict between the academic's urge to publish and the sponsor's decision not to publish. I can recall myself a period of good work with a Commonwealth agency twenty years ago which finally came to nothing because our report was not liked by the responsible Minister. I have a draft copy on my bookshelf, but no-one has ever read it, and it is not mine to publish.

For UC as an institution, the Commonwealth's change of direction is not a hardship. As many pointed out at the meeting, we are largely focussed on problems anyway, and good at delivery. But there are anxieties nonetheless among those whose research interests lie elsewhere: where will the money come from to support their endeavours?

The answers lie in the plurality I mentioned above. To start with, UC has the capacity to maintain its capacity to act as a social critic even when it is engaged in research sponsored by a client. Professor Ann Harding, for example, is both Australia's leading researcher in her field and a fearless publisher of what she sees to be important social and economic findings. Even her critics recognise that she knows what she is talking about, and do not dismiss the research on which her findings are based. She also knows how, when and where to engage in debate.

The provision of funds for what might be termed 'pro bono' or public good research, where there are no obvious sponsors, is a matter in part for our own ingenuity, and that too was discussed at the meeting. We have other tasks, too, the most urgent and important being the question of priorities: what do we value most highly, and why?

Finally, we do have to grapple, and the Workloads paper points the way, with the increasing diversity of the role of the academic. We have to find a generally accepted system in which we can reward and celebrate other signal contributions apart from research, and let go of the notion that there is only one path. Our present system, the world over, leads to the production of a lot of routine, hum-drum research papers, and to information overload, and to a lot of unhappiness. We really do need a better way.