

Vice-Chancellor's Article for *Monitor*

9 November 2000

'Vice-Chancellors as Trustees,

When this issue of *Monitor* appears the University will be acting as host to the fourth plenary meeting for 2000 of the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee. The AVCC now has a subtitle — the Council of Australian University Presidents — which is intended to help those outside the old British system understand where vice-chancellors fit in the modern university world.

Since there are now 37 universities, and four plenaries a year, and every university gets a turn to host one, it follows that we don't see the AVCC very often. The last time we hosted such a meeting was in September 1991. There aren't many present vice-chancellors who were there in September 1991, but those there are will notice a remarkable change in the look and feel of the University of Canberra. I have to say that the same could be said for many other Australian universities.

For the last decade has been a quite remarkable one. Great growth in the size of the system, great change in what we do and how we do it, a great change in funding, the emergence of Australia as a major player in international education, the first shock of a major new technology — all this has happened in ten years. In world terms Australia is in the front rank of countries whose citizens go to university. In fact, about three per cent of the Australian population are university students.

A few years ago there were influential people who could deny that Australia had a 'university system'; there were only individual universities, they asserted, whose autonomy was sacrosanct. And indeed it is true that the members of the AVCC, myself included, owe our primary loyalty to the Councils of the Universities who appointed us in the first place. We are all of us governed by Acts of State, Territory and Commonwealth Parliaments. It would be easy to say that our duty was to advance the interests of our own university at the expense of all others.

From time to time you can see this happen: University A will offer a new and interesting course that attracts students in sufficient number to make it worthwhile. University B, worried by declining numbers in its own domain decides to offer another, virtually identical. The effect is that neither course is now really viable.

But as members of the AVCC we are also conscious, I think, that we are and should act as trustees of one of Australia's most important and most remarkable pieces of infrastructure: its university system. And indeed it is a system. We have common or similar admissions rules, we pay great attention to our own and others' standards, we take in each others' graduates for higher degrees, and we employ each others' staff and graduates when we have vacancies.

That's the day-to-day stuff at the university level. The AVCC secretariat has day-to-day interaction with the Commonwealth Government and its agencies, with the corporate world, with international agencies and university systems overseas. The reasons are straightforward. What we do is important and expensive, and that is the case in every country.

So we are constantly looked at, by governments, by the outside interests we call our stakeholders, and by the media. Such scrutiny would push us to do some things similarly and in concert, even if that behaviour was not simply an outcome of being an 'industry' (motor cars have an astonishing similarity, and not just because governments set safety standards).

What role should vice-chancellors adopt, when they meet as a group? Some years ago I argued that we should, quite explicitly, see ourselves as the trustees of the university system. To begin with, the total value of the universities of the system is huge — probably \$100 billion — and every year it gets more valuable. Second, it represents an investment by generations of Australians in the future of their own society. Third, it is not realisable on the market, because the land, buildings and equipment are in constant use and that use is increasingly important; it follows that it is a continuing and growing investment, and needs to be managed that way.

Fourth, it does not belong to government, but to the society. Universities have been deliberately constructed, all of them, to be independent of government notwithstanding the important role that governments have played in establishing and funding them. The current expenditure of the universities is around \$9 billion, and governments provide only a little more than half of that, a proportion that is most likely to decline.

As I see it, our collective role as vice-chancellors is to manage this huge investment of the people of Australia in a way that would satisfactorily discharge our responsibilities as trustees. That means, in part, that we have to behave in a disinterested way when the interests of the system are at stake, and they often are. It is a hard task, but a most important one.