

## Vice-Chancellor's Article for *Monitor*

21 June 2000

### 'Gender Balance

I have said many times that one of the aspects of the University that I find especially enjoyable is its relatively even balance of men and women. Usually I go on to remark that one blessed outcome is that the University works well as an organisation. In my experience organisations that are mostly male have an excess of useful ego and are unduly competitive internally. This is not always the case in every respect, and there are even some benefits that can accrue, especially in organisations such as the army.

But on the whole the rule seems to hold. This University exhibits strong co-operative traits, and those traits help us all to get things done, done quickly, and done well. It is all too easy to make sweeping and undefendable generalisations here, and I'll try to resist the tendency. But I have to say that, again in my experience, that the sheer numbers of women in almost all Schools and sections help the University, an organisation of around a thousand people, to perform way above its weight.

If we have a problem in this area, and we do, it is that women are more abundant in the lower grades, both academic and administrative, than in the higher grades. And this is no less true than it was ten years ago, when I came to the University. Indeed, I think it is marginally more true.

And thereby hangs an irony. Several years ago, when university after university seemed to be getting a gong for good work in equity I rang up DEET and asked why we were being overlooked. After all, I argued, we were way ahead of the pack in outcomes. Ah, said the DEETie, but look at your processes! Oh, I said, defeated.

So we worked hard on our precises, and a couple of years ago we achieved that *ne plus ultra*, a high commendation for our processes in the equity area, which gladdened my heart. And I resisted the impulse to tell DETYA that our outcomes now weren't as good as they were when we didn't have good processes. Life can be a bit like that.

But why is it so? Why do we have the numbers of women that we do have, and why are they declining at the senior levels, if only marginally? First of all, the University benefits from the notably well-educated Canberra population, and many of the professions we prepare people for themselves have a lot of women practitioners. Then we were a late starter as an academic employer, and needed to have employment conventions that attracted women, child-care centres, flexible leave rules, and so on. Success breeds success, which means that women find UC an attractive place to work because there are already a lot of women here. We have had two women serve as Chancellors, a woman Acting Vice-Chancellor, and two women as Deputy Vice-Chancellors.

And so, I think, we have become something of an Australian nursery in this respect, as in others. There has been a strong push over the whole system in the last five years or so to pick suitably qualified women for senior jobs, and UC has farewelled

Mary O'Kane, Ingrid Moses, Judith Brine, Linda O'Brien, Annie Burrett, and Sue Johnston, all of them to senior posts elsewhere. The effect has been greatly to diminish our stocks of senior women, but of course to improve those of other universities. Adelaide University in particular has benefited from the UC migration.

It is, of course, practically impossible to replace a woman in a senior post with another of the same standing. There are simply not enough senior women in very many areas of the university system. The UC rates are well above the national average. And it is hardly less difficult to recruit senior women academics and managers from elsewhere, even when the job is a new one and new jobs in general are rare.

So we do what we can do, and that is to groom and prepare our own. There is no doubt that we have the talent. An active mentoring program for women staff members, and a successful 'promotion school' have led to increased numbers of academic women achieving promotion. It will not have passed unnoticed that the restructure produced a new senior administrative position for the academic divisions, the Business Unit Leader. All three are now women. Those in that post will develop a wide knowledge of the University, because of the need of the appointees to know a good deal about the University at the corporate level as well as at the divisional level.

The Senior Women's Group has made some suggestions about what else to do, and the issue is almost a perpetual item on the agenda of the Equity Committee. I would be grateful of advice from any quarter because, to return to where I started, the even balance of the sexes on our campus is in my view one of its true strengths.