

Article for Verona Burgess, *The Canberra Times*

The University of Canberra's new undergraduate program

by Don Aitkin

For the fifty years after the second world war the production of what we call 'knowledge' has increased at an enormous rate. There are now more than half a million academic journals, and no library is now able to hold or store more than a fraction of what is published.

Universities have dealt with this explosion by breaking down courses into smaller units, and adding on little bits as new themes or perspectives become important.

The first degree is now just that: anyone who commenced as an undergraduate this year will have been told dozens of times by now that they will have to go on through their working careers finding out more and more, with additional and further degrees and diplomas in store. 'Lifelong learning' is before us.

The trouble with adding on little bits to what is already a full academic program is twofold. First, adding on implies growth, both in students and in resources. Second, the more units the more variety, the more variety the smaller the coherence of the program.

In 1994 the University of Canberra recognised that the days of everlasting growth were likely to come to an end. No growth meant no extra resources, and no extra resources would mean that the undergraduate program, in particular, would have trouble finding the staff to present the great variety that had been available, let alone adding more variety.

Over the next two years the University went into policymaking mode. Six major papers on how to change to a more flexible system went through a long period of argument, each paper benefiting from the discussions surrounding its predecessor.

The outcome is a restructured undergraduate program. What UC had offered was based to some extent on the University's traditional desire to make it possible for people who were outside the academic mainstream to find a way through to that first degree.

But if we were to be faced with some years of steady student numbers then it was important to educate our students as efficiently as possible, and that meant concentrating not on what any incoming student might want to do, but on what we ourselves did best.

That would have some useful outcomes for the students. The variety that was available was so great as to be bewildering, and it was not uncommon for

students to feel isolated, picking a unit here and a unit there, but never feeling as though they belonged to a particular group until their final year.

The new undergraduate program is built on two assumptions: there are 40 or so things that we do very well, and our students are coming to UC to do one of them. If that is not their intention, then there are other good universities for them to go to. So most undergraduates will find that they belong to a particular cohort, and that they will be working with much the same group of students throughout their course.

Would the students be upset about the reduction of choice? The months of discussion suggested that they wouldn't be. About 85 per cent of the students at UC are setting out to become members of one of the learned professions, and on the whole they are less interested in choice than in the relevance of what they study to their capacity to enter and prosper in their chosen profession.

What about the staff? Wouldn't there be some resistance to the reduction of offerings, if the offerings terminated included one's own pet unit on whatever it was? Well, yes and no. Certainly there were animated discussions about what the range of offerings for a School and a Faculty should look like. But everyone knew that the undergraduate program had grown and grown without sufficient planning, and that it was becoming increasingly difficult to present the units that were published in the University's *Handbook*.

So there was a growing determination to grasp the nettle. As one academic staff member said to his colleagues, after a frustrating period of argument, 'Look, we all know we need to do something, otherwise we'll all be dead from fatigue. Let's give this a go!'

And they did. The new undergraduate program will come into effect for commencing students in 1998, though some parts of the University are trialling it this year. Continuing students will move into the program at the end of the year, guaranteed that they will not have to do more than they would have done in the old program.

What happens if the Government finds the growth tap and turns it on again? We'll worry about that when it happens, but my guess is that we would not go back to the old days. The new undergraduate program will provide better educational outcomes, as well as a better use of resources.

May 1997