



The University of Western Australia Academic Staff Association

ABN 40 132 821 498

W2 Winthrop Tower M005, University of Western Australia

35 Stirling Highway, CRAWLEY WA 6009

Tel: (08) 6488 3836 Fax: (08) 6488 1079

Email: uwaasa@cyllene.uwa.edu.au Web: www.uwaasa.uwa.edu.au

Dear Colleagues

Australian universities in 1957 and in 2013. *Plus ça change, ...?*

UWA's Centenary Year provides occasion to reflect on the past. Much was different "back in the day" as Emeritus Professor John Melville-Jones cheerfully reminded the assembled throng when the Association farewelled him in 2013. Among other whimsical recollections, John noted the Faculty of Arts had just one shared secretary when he joined UWA fifty-years ago. We may yet see that again on present trends but regrettably not so the day when a house on a 1,000 metre block on the south side of Nedlands could be purchased for a year's professorial salary.

Still, with the massed students at the gate, it's important not to let an unduly roseate vision of the past distract us. The attached excerpt from an article by Sir Eric Ashby in *Nature* (no less!) describing conditions in Australian universities in 1957 - the year Professor Melville-Jones joined UWA - paints a picture that many present day academics will, I think, find all-too-familiar.

"Present state of the universities [in 1957]

Some departments in the larger universities are in a state of chronic congestion. First-year classes of more than 1,000 are not uncommon, and failure rates are alarmingly high. ... It is commonly believed that students come to the universities inadequately prepared and not sufficiently mature to benefit from university teaching; and of course the size of elementary classes makes any tutorial tuition in the first year very difficult. It has been an Australian tradition to admit all qualified applicants to universities and not to exercise any machinery of selection. Halls of residence .. are quite inadequate. ... Academic staffs [sic] were reported by the Committee to be disheartened not only by enormous elementary classes and small honours schools but also by other difficulties. Their salary scales were low by comparison with those of other professional men [sic] ..."

"Already in her brief history Australia has made very distinguished contributions to science, scholarship and world affairs. But in recent years her universities have been taxed hopelessly beyond their capacities. The trouble is due partly to the peculiarly Australian conception of democracy which regards the right to attend a university as something in the same category as the right to drive a vehicle on the public highway. But the public enthusiasm for enjoying the benefits of higher education has not been matched by public enthusiasm for paying for them. So the universities have had to open their doors to students inadequately prepared to enter and in numbers for which no proper provision has been made; the outcome has been decade of mass-education; lectures in duplicate, practical classes with enough demonstrators, shortages of equipment, heavy examination failures and no energy left for research"

Happily, conditions improved due to, as Sir Eric describes it, “an act of statesmanship”:

“On November 28 1957, the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Menzies, announced in the House of Representatives in Canberra that the Commonwealth Government proposed, subject to co-operation from the States, to raise Commonwealth expenditures on the State universities from about £6,000,000 in the triennium 1955-57 to £22,000,000 in the triennium 1958-60. This is support on a scale beyond the dreams of Australian academic men [sic] a few years ago. It represents an act of statesmanship on the part of the Commonwealth Government. More than this, it provides at long last an opportunity for Australia’s intellectual development to keep pace with her dramatic political and economic development”¹

The prospects of receiving similar salvation today from the same source may appear bleak but my guess is it seemed as unlikely back then. One good reason to celebrate UWA’s Centenary is to identify and promote a vision of the university capable of inspiring acts of statesmanship. In 2013 the Academic Staff Association will be reaching out to members via forums, small meetings, and events for just this purpose.

The gamut of topics will run from MOOCs, to education as a business, the “tyranny” of the board of studies, to managing emails, to parking at UWA. If you have a topic/issue you would like to see covered (perhaps even in a small group) you will find a warm welcome from the Committee.

On behalf of the Committee – Stuart Bunt (Vice President), Allan McKinley (Treasurer), Victoria Burbank, Robert Cunningham, Stephen Dobbs, Philippa Maddern, Debra McDougall, and Matthew Tonts – and myself, all the very best for 2013.

Yours sincerely

Raymond da Silva Rosa
President, UWA Academic Staff Association

Ray.dasilvarosa@uwa.edu.au

Tel: 6488 1974

Rm 250, UWA Business School

¹ Excerpts from “A new deal for Australian universities” (1958) by Sir Eric Ashby, *Nature* v181: 300-302.