

19 February 2016

Professor Dawn Freshwater
Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor

Dear Professor Freshwater,

I write in response to the document entitled Renewal Project Proposal for Change dated 2 February 2016 which, on page 2, invited feedback. This has turned into a long letter, I hope you can take the time to read it.

The proposal for change focuses on three areas. An Academic Restructure, a Methodology for Evaluating Academic Roles, and Professional Services Delivery. I will focus my attention on the appended section entitled Methodology for Evaluating Academic Roles, then make some comments about the rationale for the Renewal Project, and finish with an alternative suggestion on how the savings could be achieved.

On page 2 of the document entitled Methodology for Evaluating Academic Roles, reference is made to a 2015 “analysis” which found that there were 99 academic staff members on tenured, or tenurable, appointments who had produced fewer than five publications over the last six years.

“In a 2015 UWA analysis on research output productivity levels, 99 academic staff on tenured or tenurable appointments, as well as 53 academic staff on fixed term contracts, had produced less (sic) than five publications over the last six years.”

The very next sentence in the document concedes that the ‘analytic tool’ used to arrive at a figure of 99 (and 53) underperforming academics is flawed because any metric used to analyse academic performance needs to take into account more than one measure.

“While individual academic performance needs to look at more than just one measure of productivity and must take into account achievement relative to opportunity, this analysis indicates we have challenges with meeting the level of academic excellence required to achieve the University’s strategic objectives.”

This amounts to a confession that the instrument used to identify 99 tenured and 53 contract staff is completely blunt. Yet this very instrument seems to have been used to inform the number of academic staff targeted for “redundancy” and the finding is still included in the document as evidence of the existence of a large number of poorly performing academic staff.

In his address in December 2015, the Vice Chancellor informed UWA staff members that approximately 100 academic roles would be made redundant.¹ Did this number come from the ‘blunt instrument’? Or, is this a financial

¹ On 19th December Prof. Dawn Freshwater sent an all staff email stating that the announcement of 300 redundancies made in December 2015 had been premature and was not ‘fixed or definite’.

imperative, so that 100 full time academic jobs must go to improve the financial position of the university? What is the rationale for the number of academic casualties?

If the rationale is financial, why not provide a dollar figure that the University needs to save on academic salaries, and then derive the number of academics we need to shed from that figure? However, if this is the rationale, why would the number of staff targeted for “redundancy” need to be 100? One could achieve a particular level of savings using various permutations of academic job losses. You would need far fewer Level E job losses, than you would need Level B, for instance.

If the rationale for academic “redundancies” is poor performance, again why would the number of staff targeted for “redundancy” need to be 100? That is simply the number of people who haven’t met the retrospectively applied performance indicator of five publications over six years, and even the authors of the document admit that instrument used to identify 99 allegedly underperforming tenured academic staff members is effectively blunt. What is the actual reason for thinking that we need to shed 100 (rather than some other, preferably smaller, number of) academic jobs on the grounds of performance?

Further, I question whether the so-called analysis does in fact show that we have “challenges with meeting the level of academic excellence required to achieve the University’s strategic objectives.” It might be true that we do have those challenges, but this “analysis” does little to show it. There might be any number of reasons beyond ‘achievement relative to opportunity’ why an academic has had fewer than five outputs in six years. They might have published a significant book; they may have been enduring personal circumstances that have interfered with their productivity; they might have taken on a significant service role (for the university), or perhaps for the profession (such as editing a journal); they might be part-time; and etc. Nor does having published 5 outputs in the last six years mean that you have performed well. It would depend on your Academic level and the nature of those outputs. Being the 20th named author on five papers published in mediocre journals is hardly comparable to having published three single author papers in top ranked journals with rejection rates of over 90%. And of course, there are going to be different expectations depending on the discipline you are from. Some disciplines favour books; some favour multiple author papers; some favour musical performances. There is not going to be a one-size-fits-all way of comparing academic performance across the range of disciplines that we have at UWA and any attempt to do that (even within some Faculties) would be fatally flawed from the outset.

Why, given that the authors of the document recognise the inadequacy of their blunt instrument, do they include the numbers of 99 tenured, and 53 contract academic positions as evidence of the need for academic redundancies?

The document goes on to set out a proposal for the development of Faculty specific academic performance criteria. (This ‘proposal’, I might add, refers to something that is already occurring, prior to the conclusion of the ‘consultation, in some of the Faculties.) Should these more fine-grained criteria be applied, it

might easily be shown that all or even none of the academic staff at UWA are underperforming. It is highly likely that the number of academic staff underperforming according to a more rigorous and qualitative analysis might be quite different from that derived from the initial so-called “analysis” that the document makes reference to.

Further, where the document claims that the performance criteria developed by the Dean of each Faculty should “take into account the period between 2009 and 2014”, what that, in fact, means is that the criteria for performance should be applied retrospectively. This is a serious methodological error. It is clearly in contravention of the Enterprise Bargaining agreement. It is not legitimate to performance-manage people in hindsight. If the expectation for appropriate academic performance in the past six years was to publish 5 or more outputs, then Academic staff should have been informed of this requirement six years ago and reminded of the expectation at yearly PDAs/PDRs/PARs. Given that this was not done and that no documents outlining the minimum expectations for academic performance for each level were made available to staff, academics should not be penalized for not adhering to a set of performance indicators that did not exist.

In light of all this, it seems that the authors of this document have conflated redundancy with performance management. You don’t make *people* redundant. Redundancy is something that can only apply to *roles* in an organisation. It must be made clear to academic staff whether positions are going to be made redundant or whether their intention is for people to lose their jobs on the grounds of poor performance, according to retrospectively applied criteria.

Finally, it is hard to make sense of the passage on page 3 of this section, which outlines the role of the so-called ‘University Oversight Panel’. It claims:

“The role of the oversight panel will be to ensure:

- the faculty methodologies meet the fundamental principles of fairness, consistency, transparency and efficiency;
- the appropriate application of local expectations has been applied; and
- that faculty recommendations are relative to opportunity.”

Firstly, it is quite possible that a methodology might be fair, consistent, transparent and efficient at the same time as being basically wrong, unjust, and in contravention of, for instance, the EB agreement. A murderer might be fair, consistent, transparent, and efficient. This doesn’t make murder right. The “appropriate application of local expectations” is simply jargon. Whose expectations are being discussed? The “faculty recommendations are relative to opportunity”? What could this mean? Any number of things, or nothing. Whose opportunity is being considered here? Jargon such as this does nothing to reassure staff that the application of the ‘methodologies’ will be just, or even legal.

So much for the Methodology for Evaluating Academic Roles. My next comments refer to the underlying motivations for the Renewal Project.

In Section 2 (Background) of the introductory document there are two main reasons given for 'the need for change' at UWA. The first reason stated is that UWA needs to improve to ensure 'long-term success'. The second reason is financial: UWA is in the midst of a 'budget crisis'.

First, there seems to be another conflation, this time of imperatives. What has been suggested is a large scale and highly disruptive Academic restructure as a means to respond to a financial imperative. Decisions about the Academic structure of the University should be made for reasons concerning the proper functioning of the UWA Academy, with a focus on our core activities of teaching, research and community engagement.

Second, with regard to the claim that UWA needs to improve in order to ensure long-term success, there is an alarming lack of detail (read: no detail) about what kind of 'long-term success' we are trying to achieve. It would be helpful if the document made clear exactly what the nature of the long-term success being sought might be. The document is worryingly devoid of any discussion of our overall vision for the University and the values that we intend to pursue and promote. The University Executive needs to set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) goals. Being a top 50 University by 2050 is not such a goal. It is an *aspiration*, at most. Success of that kind is not SMART. It might be specific, measurable and timely, but is not realistic or achievable because its achievement depends on so many factors outside the University's direct control. Why not abandon that "goal" and focus our energy on being an excellent regional university according to our own SMART goals? Aiming to achieve a top 50 ranking is like aiming to be happy. Only a fool has happiness as a goal. Happiness, like a high ranking, is an epiphenomenal characteristic: if all goes well, it will arise from a focus on the dedicated and committed pursuit of more tangible goals.

Finally, there is little in the way of information pertaining to the alleged 'budget crisis'. Critics of the proposal have been reminded on several occasions by the Vice Chancellor Paul Johnson to remember that we are 'in the real world' not fantasy land; in the real world money is the bottom line. That may be so, and I think most of us do accept that we cannot indefinitely continue to have outgoings greater than our incomings (as the Macawber Principle serves to remind us). However, there is, and should be, some *open* discussion and debate over the way the university budget is organised. The paper *Securing Success* contains a range of comparisons to other Go8 universities, but neither that paper nor the document under discussion reveal any hard facts about the exact distribution of funds in the University. In particular, they do not indicate where and how we are overspending. A great deal of money was spent on a vacuous and frankly cringe-worthy advertising campaign (including a person in a peacock costume accompanied by two French maids who achieved international 'excellence' for UWA for all the wrong reasons!), that was immediately followed by a significant reduction in our percentage of local school leaver's first preferences, and in our 2016 enrolments. The University has also spent a significant amount on the Education Futures portfolio which, with great fanfare, has so far achieved an arguably marginal change from Moodle to Blackboard (a deal that had Blackboard Executives struggling to hide their glee), and had no measurable

positive effect on UWA's teaching ratings on the Good Universities Guide. But the UWA Executive has really only proposed one cost-cutting measure, a reduction in staff numbers through a program of redundancy because, as staff have been regularly reminded, the biggest cost to UWA is salaries. But this is not, and should not be, surprising given that a University is nothing if it is not primarily a collection of Academics and support staff.

In discussions of the 'so-called' 2015 Budget Reforecast of October 2015 (I take 'reforecast' to mean 'deficit'), mention is rarely made of the fact that 2015 was an aberrant year, which is unlikely to be repeated in the foreseeable future. More importantly it was an aberration that we all knew was coming for at least 12 years, so how the management of the university could have been surprised by our 2015 overspend is not obvious. It seems rash to base the financial case for a complete restructure, a huge reduction in staff and an enormously expensive and disruptive upheaval on a budget deficit in a year where we had a half-cohort of local school leavers.

In the email of 19 December in which Prof. Dawn Freshwater stated that the announcement of 300 redundancies made in December 2015 had been premature and was not 'fixed or definite', a link was given to the minutes from a meeting of the Strategic Resources Committee, to provide more context for the proposed renewal project. Leaving aside the fact that these 'minutes' are only barely intelligible, I don't see why, if the first option was presented as serious, it has not been seriously entertained.

"Continue with management responses and work towards increased performance over time. This option has been pursued over the last 5 years and has had success but will be unlikely to deliver on our ambition of being in the top 50 in the foreseeable future. Natural attrition and performance management will require a 10+ year window of opportunity. This response time is too slow and will not free up the resources necessary to invest in significant developments such as IT architecture and to recruit the high quality international staff we need."

The main reason, it seems to me, is that the University Executive wants immediate results. They want to make "redundant" or demote a large number of allegedly poor performing staff, and immediately replace them with International research stars in order to 'deliver on their ambition of being in the top 50'. Ten years is apparently too slow, even though the "goal" has always been top 50 by 2050. A question that has not been answered is whether this 'fast-track' solution will actually have the desired effect of elevating the University's rank on the international indices. We can 'parachute in' some international research stars, but that will not necessarily create the *environment* necessary to produce world-class research.

Why don't we pursue a version of option 1, but drop the focus on being a top 50 University?

Instead focus on reaffirming our standing as a Go8 University, by:

- streamlining our service delivery in light of the findings of the functional review, in particular freeing up the bureaucratic noose that continually

hampers the ability of both academics and the executive to respond nimbly to new opportunities

- reducing the ratio of professional to academic staff (with a focus on maintaining academic and student support services)
- spending the money set aside for the renewal project and its suite of redundancies on improving the IT architecture of the University.
- allowing academic staff the security, predictability and time they need in order to produce high quality research and excellent teaching
- using early retirement and ongoing (rather than retrospective) performance management (administered at the lowest structural level i.e the School) as a way to further reduce staff costs
- reaffirming our place as the University of choice for high achieving Western Australian school leavers
- pursuing a set percentage increase in our international full-fee paying student numbers, by a set date
- reducing the number of Faculties in the University by looking for points of connection in research and teaching collaboration and cross disciplinary academic activity
- improving staff morale across the university.
- lobbying both sides of politics, and using community engagement, to increase our funding by convincing people of the enormous intrinsic and instrumental value to our society of government-funded tertiary education and research

If a permanent reduction in the University's cost base still cannot be achieved

- consider a percentage reduction in pay for all staff, at every level, but perhaps with a larger percentage for those on the highest salaries
- consider a nine-day fortnight for both professional and academic staff.

If you have read this far, I thank you for your time. I hope that you take my comments in the spirit in which they were intended, which was to provide an academic's perspective on aspects of the Renewal Proposal.

Yours sincerely,
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