

NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2019

I trust that those of you who have been teaching are managing to get to the end of the marking season. Hang in there. Apologies for the lack of communication from UWA ASA of late. I have been holding off on commenting on the current situation hoping that there might be some positive developments, moving forward from the disappointment arising from the resignation of our VC less than two years into her term. Hope! That *ignis fatuus*!

It's been a busy week for 'management' at UWA, so here's a little update.

You may or may not have heard the headline items. UWA Press is set to be closed down. Staff of the Berndt Museum (the world-acclaimed collection of cultural artefacts, currently stored in boxes in a converted carpark—that's another story) have been advised that their contracts will not be renewed. And a round of voluntary redundancies was announced in the areas of Finance and Campus Management, but the number expected/required was not released. There is so much that could be said about the complete lack of consultation regarding the UWA Press and the Berndt, but for now I want to focus on the redundancies.

This week's announcement of voluntary redundancies may have come as quite a shock to the people in those sections, not least because when the Chief Operating Officer and the Head of Human Resources were directly asked about redundancies at the rather 'light-hearted and jovial' Service Transformation Forum last week. In that forum, they replied that it was too soon to know about redundancies because the Service Transformation Project would have to make more progress before anything could be said for certain. It is hard to believe that this much 'progress' could have been made in a week to move from 'nothing is certain' to a formal call for redundancies! In fact, when queried regarding redundancy announcements prior to Christmas at the recent ACC, administration noted being "unaware" of any.

While discussions of the University's recent past are rarely encouraged and certainly not overly enjoyable, it seems worth reflecting back four years to when the euphemistically named "Renewal Project" (henceforth 2016, as this kind of manipulative language should be avoided) was announced, in the weeks leading up to Christmas. While the project involved a large number of redundancies across both the academic and professional staff, we were repeatedly assured that those who remained would be the beneficiaries of a shiny new world of efficient service delivery and a set of transparent and equitable performance expectations for academics. 2016 cost the University more than \$10 million dollars on redundancy payments alone—almost all of them voluntary, in the end. Those of us who were here then will remember excellent high-performing colleagues who took redundancies for a number of strategic reasons of their own—colleagues who we should never have lost. This is the price you pay for voluntary redundancies; they are neither strategic, nor are they targeted.

But at least then there was the promise of a Brave New World of efficient and high-quality 'Service Delivery' to look forward to. Despite the loss of numerous key professional staff-members the 'service' at UWA, we were assured, would improve not decline. We all know that the reality for the past four years has been nothing even approaching that promise. Not only has the level and quality of professional support declined rapidly in the University—not due to individual staff members, but due to the ill-thought-through and religious managerial attachment to 'The Model' (more accurately,

I think, called the Panopticon)—but even the promised financial savings have not materialised. Our understanding is that both core professional and academic salary costs rose even more rapidly post-Renewal, than they were rising beforehand. Many people who took generous voluntary redundancy payouts during 2016 or were let go soon after have, since then, been re-hired, either as employees or on consultancy contracts. Academics, by and large, still don't have the clear performance expectations they were promised and, indeed, were told by the HR Director at another recent forum that our institution is too 'immature' to link performance to reward.

The diagnosis of this outcome (which UWA ASA repeatedly warned against, at the time) is not hard to see, and is admitted quite openly by senior management. Despite the rhetoric since Paul Johnson of deciding 'what to stop', we didn't stop doing anything. We didn't change our processes or our ways of working, we just shuffled the deckchairs on the Titanic into nice, functionally-aligned rows. Then, at least, the Titanic had just left the harbour and many of us could convince ourselves that there were no icebergs around.

Now there is a clear iceberg looming, or at least so we are told by the Chief Operating Officer who is openly going around saying that we will be trading insolvent in eight months if we don't change our ways. Some of you may have heard whispers about the "Targeted Financial Strategy", the goal of which is to reduce our costs by \$50 million in the next two years. \$50 million in two years! This week's decisions—voluntary redundancies, disband UWA Press, and defund the Berndt Museum—are some of the first, desperate efforts to meet this target. But it should be pretty clear that the "Targeted Financial Strategy" (such as it is) is neither *targeted* nor *strategic*, and only 'financial' in the sense that it is purely about money.

It appears that we are about to make exactly the same mistake we made in 2016. We are now promised another Brave New World of Service Transformation and are spending hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars on consultants and "EY Ideation Hubs" (and yes, ideation hubs *are* as vacuous and expensive as they sound!) not to implement it, but just to work out what this Service-Transformed world might look like. And yet we are making people redundant before we have any idea of which jobs might go, which processes might be automated, 'what to stop'. Who will want to bet against the same pattern of rehiring and cost escalation in this Renewal 2.0?

And so we plough on towards the iceberg with the promise now of the deckchairs being organised into 'Tiers' rather than being 'Functionally Aligned'. While the reputation of UWA takes another hit in the national newspapers, the Schools and Faculties continue to implement a strategy of broad scale penny-pinching, many of us are wondering: Who is in charge of the ship? The 'skipper' has an exit strategy, a private lifeboat headed for Auckland. The 'purser' has bailed—and who could blame him? And still a stony silence remains around other vacant or vacating leadership positions. The DVCR Robyn Owens is apparently due to retire this month—as announced over a year ago—and not a word of any replacement, acting or otherwise? The Executive Dean and (briefly) Pro-Vice Chancellor for Health and Medical Sciences is apparently standing down from her 'secondment' next month—as announced over six months ago—and not a word of a replacement, acting or otherwise? And how far are these poisoned chalices now?

Time and again at Academic Board and in other venues we are regaled with our great new Strategy, and the Motto, Mission and Values that we are allegedly expected to share. But where is the strategy here? How do these recent decisions embody those core Values we profess of Openness,

Honesty, Tolerance and Trust? Is it Honest to claim no decision has been made about redundancies a week before announcing them? Is it Open to leave the entire University wondering about imminent changes in the Senior Leadership? Can we Trust a leadership that appears hell-bent on repeating the mistakes of the past with only a different set of catchphrases and glib reassurances to persuade us that the iceberg is, in fact, an oasis?

In the true spirit of these Values, it seems reasonable to ask for answers to the following questions:

What was the business case for these redundancies, and who approved it?

At what point was it decided to undertake this round of redundancies, and what stage was that decision at when the University was assured that there were no certain plans around this?

What measures will be put in place to ensure that we do not simply repeat the mistakes of Renewal?

What work will be stopped when these redundancies take effect?

Was the Senate informed of the plan to cut the UWA Press after 85 years of operation before the decision was announced? What about the Berndt?

How does the defunding of Berndt and closing of UWA Press fit into the role of UWA as a fundamental historical and cultural body of Western Australia?

Was there any reputational risk assessment done before these decisions were made?

If you would like to support UWA Press please sign the petition bit.ly/2oWXRm2

If you have read this far, put Thursday 21st of November in your diary. UWA ASA Collegial Drinks at the Uniclub from 4pm. Hope to see you all there. Bring a friend.