

## The Future of Higher Education

**Jerry Ellis, Chancellor, Monash University**

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Afternoon everyone and John thank you for the introduction. You mentioned Landcare, one of the lovely ironies for me anyway about being invited to join Landcare as its chairman was that a decade or so ago I was also the owner of the Octeddy problem and the face of environmental disaster. So to be associated with the face of environmental triumphalism as Landcare as we regard ourselves in Landcare as a nice little irony.

The topic of your morning's conversation was the future of higher education in Australia, and I have to say that from my perspective as a chancellor and that is not as an academic, not as really someone who works in the tertiary field, but out in the world as company director, it does seem to me to be a very optimistic future. And I say that on the basis largely of what I've seen at Monash but I've also been one way or another associated with other universities, including Wollongong, the hugely successful regional university, University of Western Australia where I started in university life. And see what Queensland has done, but also here in Melbourne to see the imaginative moves that Melbourne University are taking with the reconstruction of degree courses.

So I think the future for the tertiary sector is extremely strong, but of course it could be better. And it's very interesting to see the way in which the vice chancellors, all of whom are really outstanding individuals, the way in which they're reorganising their affairs particularly in relation to communication with governments. And I'd say a couple of comments about that later on.

But the main thing I wanted to talk about today is what I'm qualified to do and that is chancellors and councils or senates. I use those... I'll use the word council because that's what we have at Monash, but of course many universities call their peak body senates. And I pose three questions to myself and will attempt to answer them, the first is do they add value? And the second is if so, what is it they add value and how do they do it? And can we do better?

And the answers, do they add value? Yes. If so and what and how? Well, the what is little I believe and it's with great difficulty what they add. And can we do better as councils? And the answer to that is clearly yes. And I base this on my experience of eight years of Monash plus interactions with other chancellors, both Victorian and nationally. And as well as peeping into other universities from time to time, but it's based on experience. I don't claim any expertise or any years of study of the subject.

So what value do councils add? Well the first great value add that councils do is they select the vice chancellor, and that is the single most important thing they do. And if that's all they did, that would be enough. It is a very demanding task in any walk of life, be it a board in a public company or anywhere, but that is the single most important thing that can be done. And if you look around Australian

universities today you'd have to say that councils have done a very fine job in general. Now particularly I believe that is the case here in Victoria.

Then associated with that of course is assessing the vice chancellor's performance, and vice chancellors like any other human being, perform excellently and indifferently. And some of that can be a factor of all sorts of things including health and it is council's job to be sufficiently in tune with the strategy and the business plans of the university, to be able to assess how it's progressing and how the vice chancellor is managing all of that. With a view to seeing whether or not something needs to be done about it. And that can only be done by the council.

So in terms of adding value, there is no doubt that councils add value if it's only for that one reason. But then there are other things of course like any board or any council, and that is applying common sense reviews and questioning of propositions and information that flows to the council through the vice chancellor and his management team.

And of course all of this is questioning, critiquing, demanding further information, all of those things which tends to lead the vice chancellor and his management team to think that council is a negative body, an unhelpful body. Well that is true of every boardroom in this country, it's true of every council I'm sure, and that's what our job is.

So the management who complain about that, and they all do, are just venting a little bit of frustration which they'll get over, but I can't see a day when councils will change from that behaviour. That is what they're there to do. But in addition to that they are there to advocate what the university is doing outside. Not to announce new initiatives, not to announce new projects, but to support the university and the things that it's doing once they've been approved and decided by the council. So there is an advocacy role for us in the wider community but the main role within the council is a questioning, critiquing, pulling apart, demanding more information and so on. As part of the risk management you might say of the activity.

Things that councils shouldn't do is try to manage the university, first of all we're incompetent, none of us are by and large academics. None of us know sufficiently well the institution of which we are members, most of us have got three or four other activities going on at the same time. So it is not something that we should do to try to manage. And I think by and large, or certainly in Victoria that is clearly the attitude of councils and I think by and large that is true around the country. But there have been one or two chancellors from time to time who have taken on the job of vice chancellor and that clearly is something that shouldn't happen, should never be allowed to happen but it does and then eventually the council does something about that by tapping the chancellor on the shoulder.

A couple of other things that area important and particularly given the structure of our modern councils, is the need for confidentiality in some things. And that is not always easy to manage but I think councils are getting better at it. And certainly at Monash I do every second council meeting at least give a little lecture on confidentiality and the fact that the council papers are there for personal use, not for sending out to a team of helpers to arm you with questions. They're there... you're there....appointed there as an individual.

Now the how, the difficulty of the how, which could lead us to improvement of course in the view of most chancellors around the country is related to two factors. One is the size of councils and the other is the method of selection. In the case of Victoria we have 21 members of council and there are representatives from students, under graduate and post graduate, from government, people appointed by the government and other people appointed by the council itself. Most people that are in business anyway would say that a board of 21 is too large, it's too large for everyone to have a contribution in a

sensible timeframe within a meeting. It's too large to manage in a cohesive manner, and it's unnecessary anyway in a governing body to have 21 voices around the table.

So company boards, public company boards have a varying number of people but the ANZ where I'm a director, we think eight is a good number, and it varies from time to time, goes up to nine occasionally, down to seven even occasionally but mostly it's around eight. Other boards have numbers that vary but always not far from ten, certainly not 20. And the other issue apart from size is that of how people get beyond council. And there are people on council who are elected, take the students for example, a student comes from the student union and then sits on a debate on council about voluntary student union issues. That person is almost impossibly conflicted, there are people who are elected from members of the staff, the academic staff. And there maybe, although not at our university, discussion about rates of pay or how to deal with the unions or that sort of thing. Again you get impossible, well not impossible, but you get conflicts.

So there is a debate going on amongst chancellors along the lines that the number within the council should be reduced to something like maybe 15 but we don't need to think of a number but certainly less than 20. And people should be appointed rather than elected, particularly to avoid the conflicts, but also to make sure that you get the range of skills and competencies that you need to give a decent review.

In Victoria we're not totally wedded to that sort of model as an ideal and most of the Victorian universities, certainly all the chancellors anyway, I can speak for the chancellors on this topic alone, we want to build the relationship with the Victorian government. Which is a good relationship and we want it to get better, and we certainly want that to happen long before we got for an alternative model of governance.

Let me talk about chancellors, of course there is a ceremonial job for a chancellor, there are graduation ceremonies and other events and they really are the highlight of being a chancellor. It's quite extraordinary to stand on the stage and receive up to 400 young people, all of whom are happy, all of whom are successful and they come across and you greet them and they move on, and all of the auditorium which will have maybe 2,000 people in, are warm and friendly. I mean that's a great honour, a great privilege and really the highlight of being a chancellor.

The other activities are more like being a chairman of a board of company, you're the confidant of the vice chancellor but you're also the judge and mentor to the vice chancellor. You have your colleagues who are other chancellors and that is a very rich range of people, none of whom by and large are academics, but all with a great interest in furthering the tertiary sector. And I think as a body we have the opportunity maybe to help promote the sector because we are independent of the vice chancellors and independent of academics. And in that way maybe we'd have somewhat more credibility with the minister or ministers, and have some ability to promote the strategies that the vice chancellors are dealing with.

In that regard we all warmly welcome the creation of Universities Australia, lifting it from the Australian vice chancellors committee that was, which in the view of vice chancellors as well as chancellors was a pretty ineffective lobby group, largely because it wasn't sufficiently professional. And the commitment to move that into a professional group with focused information streams to people led by a board comprising the vice chancellors, I think is a very good move in the right direction.

But there's much more we can do and probably there's a role here for chancellors, and I'll leave on this note because it also relates to the business community that John mentioned in your discussions this morning. My observation of Monash anyway over the last ten years is that it is a vastly improved performer on a whole range of fronts. First of all financial, very strong financial performance, the way

it manages its assets, the way it measures its costs, significant improvements in productivity. But above all of that is a great drive on quality of teaching and quality of research as well as getting research funding into the place.

So Monash today I think is significantly different, better performing, high productivity unit than it was ten years ago. And I don't believe that would be well understood by members of cabinet in Canberra or even by the Victorian government. And I suspect the same is true of many institutions, so I do think there is a role there for chancellors to be able to make those comments, and make them also to the business community. Because I suspect the view is that universities still have some of the old fashioned reputation anyway of academics who never turn up to work, who are on tenure, who don't teach, who are lazy fellas and women who just are feeding off the system.

That is patently not true and if it is in any way part of the reputation that we have out there in the business community and the government, we ought to be doing everything we can to advise people of what is the situation. So with those remarks John I'm happy to take questions.

## **End of transcript**

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