

...time yet for a hundred indecisions...



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Ever since the announcement of the pending Higher Education Review, odd but apt lines from Eliot's *Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* have flittered unbidden across my mind. A review of the university sector is not novel and some past attempts have been what Prufrock called '...time yet for a hundred indecisions, And for a hundred visions and revisions'. This Review may be similar but I suspect that it will have far-reaching and long-term ramifications irrespective of which political faction is in power. There will be implications for libraries and librarians in all sectors not just higher education.

It is apparent that the present Australian Government is committed to pervasive social re-engineering which includes re-casting the way in which universities are funded and operate. What is not clear is the extent and rapidity of the envisaged change. Cuts to university operating budgets for the 1996-99 triennium heralded the commencement of the Government's campaign. In the rhetoric which followed the announcement, further reductions were presaged if the universities failed to embark upon meaningful reforms.

In this context, the Higher Education Review can be seen as part of a pincer movement by the Government to use public debate and evaluation to force the rate of change within universities. Statements by the review chair, Mr Roderick West, indicate that the review is likely to conduct a fundamental re-evaluation of the nature and purpose of universities. His intimations, that improving access to higher education has resulted in a lessening of quality, may well mean a preference for a system which differentiates institutions according to the emphasis which they accord to research, teaching and training. Such a move would be regarded as an anathema by many Australians but many others will greet it with victory shouts or apathy.

To what extent such a move will occur will depend to a large measure on the reactions of the electorate, the influence of the university sector and on the interplay of vested interests both within the review panel and externally. For some years, higher education in Australia has been increasingly self-supporting. The review is likely to quicken the pace especially the introduction of fees for all courses.

The larger universities may well find that they can attract sufficient students and research funding to continue with little change to their existence. Smaller and non-metropolitan institutions will find the future more challenging. Some will curtail their activities and concentrate their course offerings and research programs. Others may be forced to amalgamate with larger institutions. A few may well become the Australian campuses of international universities.

Whatever happens, universities will become increasingly creative, devious and competitive in

their quest for funds. Areas such as student attraction, research contracts, alumni support and industry sponsorship will become key elements of their economic survival. In order to increase their competitive advantage, Australian universities will seek to strengthen their relationships with institutions elsewhere in the world and may forsake links with other Australian universities.

What effect will these changes have on libraries? While we may consider libraries to be educationally and culturally essential, a sizeable proportion of the community does not share the vision. Even within universities, many of our expected clients satisfy their information needs from other sources. It is conceivable that universities may follow the lead of local government and contract-out library services! To survive and prosper, we need to raise our profile in the community and adopt appropriate techniques used successfully in other service industries.

A number of university libraries have identified the challenges and have introduced quality management and other strategies. Not infrequently, they are models within their institutions for operating efficiency. Librarians have long co-operated to improve access to information through mechanisms such as inter-library loan and reciprocal borrowing. Through the Council of Australian University Librarians and state-based organisations, university libraries have collaborated on projects such as the purchase of databases and provision of storage facilities.

In the future, this interaction will need to be more dynamic and will affect activities now regarded as the preserve of the institution. There is scope for activities such as technical services and some aspects of reference to be performed effectively on a shared basis. The development of information literacy and other instructional packages can also be shared.

It is unlikely that well-run, client-centred libraries will cease to exist as core components of universities. Nor is the Internet or remote information providers likely to displace library staff and services. However, some library staff members are candidates for extinction if they are unwilling or unable to acquire new skills and attitudes. The future will be the preserve of the flexible, lateral thinker who is able to see opportunities, quick enough to take them, and able to benefit from them.

Librarians cannot afford to be one of Prufrock's attendant lords —

*Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politically cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous —
Almost, at times, the Fool.*

*... universities will
become increasingly
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quest for funds ...
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research contracts,
alumni support and
industry
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