

The cranium of the university



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Higher education is under review again. With education Minister Amanda Vanstone's recent appointment of Rod West to chair the committee to review higher education policy and funding came the latest in a string of university investigations. Our universities have been under scrutiny for decades but the Dawkins' 'reforms' of the eighties generated spirited debate and form the reference point for much that has happened since. Few would argue that higher education continues to be in need of significant overhaul but many are doubtful that the Federal Government's strategies secure the best outcomes. Not all universities have responded to the need for change with enthusiasm and it has been a most difficult task to address the mechanisms for streamlined financial management and structural change while meeting the educational goals of this sector.

Mr West, retired principal of Trinity Grammar School in Sydney, was surprisingly outspoken in media interviews following his appointment. It is usual that the views of an independent chairman are carefully veiled to avoid the perception that outcomes have been prematurely reached. But West has had some interesting things to say which may refocus the debate on the liberal arts and the role of universities in developing in their students the capacity for analytical and conceptual thought.

This view would have won support from Thomas Jefferson who was a champion of the value of learning and was responsible for the establishment of the University of Virginia in 1819. He was also its architect. The library (which Robert Hughes has called the most beautiful room in America) was designed as the 'cranium of the university'. This expression beautifully synthesises the role of higher education and the place of the library in facilitating the development of the skills of thought and analysis. Access to information, a right of all citizens in our society, remains a critical success factor in the higher education arena.

New information technologies have revolutionised the way libraries in all sectors deliver their services. On-line information has created the demand for computing and telecommunications resources and the development of the skills needed to manage these resources. Additional demands evolve from the need to continue to deliver traditional paper-based information services. All librarians have been enveloped in this technological revolution but it is libraries in organisations delivering post-secondary education which have faced an added burden — the imperative of remote or distance learning. So while the principles of vocational education and training and higher education continue to be re-

visited, so too have delivery mechanisms. University libraries must provide the intellectual fodder for a dispersed community of knowledge seekers. This mandates a vitally important role for these libraries in the delivery of quality services across all university departments.

Distance education will continue to be a priority for higher education and there is the risk that the role of the university library could become marginalised. Evidence is abundant that course designers are relying on compiled study notes and photocopied reference materials ('bricks' or 'course packs' in the jargon of today) to compensate students for lack of access to on-campus facilities. The temptation for these students to rely on these accessories to learning is great. Given their incapacity to participate in lectures, tutorials and the social aspects of collegiate campus life, all of which assist in the development of skills of thought and analysis, these students need to be encouraged to utilise library services. There are many initiatives designed to support library research by remote students many of which have placed demands on libraries outside the universities. Research conducted at Deakin University identifies low usage of the university library by post graduate research students and reveals a pattern of usage of libraries in other sectors which is only in part explained by the need to access special collections (see page 10).

Many university libraries are developing exciting delivery programs — as is the case in the TAFE sector. But, if the distinguishing feature of higher education is to be the development of research and analytical skills, a university degree without an emphasis on the utilisation of the resources of the university library will be a much diminished achievement.

The articles in this month's *inCite* address the challenging future facing universities and their libraries. Will the virtual university take the librarian out of the 'information loop' as Colin Steele (page 8) asks? Roy Stall's analysis of university library positions over a five year period shows overall growth but identifies a decline in professional positions (page 14). John Shipp's perceptive piece (page 4) clearly throws down the gauntlet to the profession to create an exciting future while providing some insights into Mr West's review of higher education.

If Mr West is committed to the concept and value of a liberal arts university education he should be encouraged to recognise the important role of the university library — the cranium of the university — in achieving this end. ■

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