

# To market, to market...

Arthur O'Neill

## The university of life

'This is a secular age,' replies [Professor] Godwin. 'You cannot turn back the clock. You cannot condemn an institution for moving with the times.'

'By an institution you mean the university?'

'Yes, universities, but specifically faculties of humanities, which remain the core of any university.'

The humanities the core of the university. She [Elizabeth Costello] may be an outsider, but if she were asked to name the core of the university today, its core discipline, she would say it was moneymaking. That is how it looks from Melbourne, Victoria ...

J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003, p. 125)

In earlier pieces (O'Neill, 2002, 2010, 2012), I chewed on and tried to digest newspaper advertisements made by universities. Byproducts did not come out smelling like roses: universities are scarcely able to present themselves without boasting, crass displays of salesmanship and brazen invocations of virtue. Now I hark to their recruiting calls by taking a sample (the bias is all mine) from recent announcements. Maybe universities went about seeking employees differently in the good old days - I don't go into that - but these days they are, as I hope to show, besotted with marketing brands as they seek acolytes to join them in the vision splendid.

## Top dogs

Using job advertisements to report a university's high ranking is like barbers painting 'Hairdresser of the Year' on their windows. The sign is the massage: you'll feel good, look good, after entering such places. Institutional strengths are advanced, though it was not always so: two-liners in Wednesday's 'Men and Boys' columns left out strengths of employers. Announcements of jobs in universities convey expectations that, if not realised only in

God, will be requisite for membership of His management team. Take this example from an advertisement for an Associate Librarian:

You will provide innovative leadership, strategic planning, and management of liaison and research support services across the Library Services portfolio, including policy development, quality assurance and high level liaison with strategic partners. Other leadership responsibilities include the Library's web and electronic interfaces, cultural collections and archives.

No hands-on stuff with books in this one.

A template for jobs down the line is provided by the manner in which those at the top are displayed, usually with the assistance of executive search consultants. Monash University wants a Vice-Chancellor - 'Leading Monash to a brilliant future' says the sub-title - 'to build on the momentum generated ...': by the present incumbent. Apart from telling readers what a hot scone Monash is, the advertisement includes:

A visionary and strategic leader of the highest calibre, the successful candidate will be bold in thinking and creative in spirit - one who will have the exceptional ability and profile demanded for the role of steering a large-scale and complex research-intensive university, constantly determined to achieve excellence and to make a difference to the world.

Great expectations, indeed. Happily, expectations of humility and modesty are not included. If they were, the wrong sort of leader could apply ...

In another place, Griffith University, and down the ladder a bit, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

provides strategic leadership for the portfolio areas of academic planning and quality; students, teaching and learning; academic staff; and student and staff equity ... The role requires exceptional management and operational skills and the ability to drive a culture of performance.

Far be it for me to cavil at the semicolons, for they butter my literary bread; but are we to suppose that the anointed one will provide strategic leadership for a portfolio area of academic staff? In which respect? And is a culture of performance to be driven by vague promises or veiled threats? The same advertisement also calls for a deputy vice chancellor (engagement) who 'provides strategic leadership for the external engagement and representation of the University ... The role plays a pivotal part ... in fostering strategic alliances with key stakeholders from industry, government, education and community groups'. 'Strategy' and 'strategic leadership' keep popping up. Devising tactics is, presumably, the lot of subordinate breeds.

Slightly further down the ladder (or maybe up), Deakin University's headline is 'We're Looking for Worldly People' in an advertisement for a Pro Vice-Chancellor, Faculty of Business and Law. Helped by an executive search firm, it announces: 'An ambitious LIVE the future strategic plan has the University focussed on bringing the opportunities of the digital age to deliver brilliant education and world-class innovation and research, while strengthening communities and delighting staff, students and friends.'

Now to the job: an 'exceptional entrepreneurial leader' is sought 'in the role of Pro Vice-Chancellor to play a key role in this new strategic direction and head up the University's Faculty of Business and Law with a clear vision and enthusiastic leadership'. The appointee will provide 'outstanding academic leadership' and 'will be committed to Deakin's premium cloud and located learning and teaching strategy, graduate employability and innovative research'.

Deakin's Pro Vice-Chancellor and friends are going to be high as kites and approaching visions of heavenly bliss. It's onwards, ever upwards, 'to the next level of achievement' as the University of Queensland says when 'seeking to appoint a new Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International), who will lead the University's Global Strategy and Internationalisation plan ...' While conveying the expectation that new brooms sweep clean, an unwritten code requires universities to glance backwards and nod deferentially. So La Trobe puts in its announcement of the position of Head of School, Law:

With the appointment in 2012 of Professor John Dewar as Vice-Chancellor, along with a number of significant senior executive appointments in the past 12 months, the University is well positioned to build on its achievements and continue to transform into a modern and efficient institution of higher education with a regional footprint and a global focus, committed to making a difference through its teaching and research.

Those executives make all the difference. Deans have transmogrified into Executive Deans. The University of Queensland wants two of them. According to an advertisement placed by the appositely named search firm of Heidrick & Struggles, the one to lead a newly minted Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences will be involved in 'building coherence of purpose and culture, setting and implementing strategic direction, and establishing effective administrative practices and service delivery modes'. The 'ability to unify diverse discipline groups, identify synergies and drive opportunities with existing and merging local and offshore partners' are required. The successful candidate 'will need a global perspective, the ability to inspire and lead a clear vision for the Faculty, and should be a collaborative, team player with a strong institutional commitment'. In all, the Faculty needs a messiah to shepherd its eight Schools and other bits and pieces out of the wilderness of incoherent purpose and culture. To nail my colours to the mast, I reckon disunity and incoherence are marks of universities that are worthy of the name.

Another new faculty at the University of Queensland, Health and Behavioural Sciences, already has a 'coherent focus' - 'on health and well-being underpinned by a clear integrative theme related to preventative health and behaviour change'. 'The opportunity now exists for a strategic and visionary leader to head this new faculty.' Enter, stage left, the Executive Dean who 'will develop the vision for the new faculty ... and implement the strategy in order to create a cohesive and dynamic environment that takes the health disciplines forward in all domains - research, teaching and engagement'.

Then there is the Executive Dean's part (not mentioned for the other one) in steering this ship of followers: 'As a member of the university's Senior Management Group, the Executive Dean will contribute to the corporate mission of the university. They will be a key representative [sic] of the Vice-Chancellor and the university to the external community, in particular to the professions and disciplines represented by the faculty.' That's a bit confused (maybe because the University used another executive search consultancy) but you get the idea: the former Vice-Chancellor left under a cloud but now we are kicking arse and new executive bloods will be rockin' the joint.

## Groovers, movers and assorted strategists

If there are no local or international elephant stamps to announce in advertisements then look to the pleasures of living hereabouts. Staff are attracted 'from around Australia and the world to Armidale in the beautiful New Eng-

land region of New South Wales'. They enjoy 'a vibrant cosmopolitan university city' that is 'recognised as a centre of culture' and 'is well served with high quality art, music, theatre and public and private education'. What about the university? An affirmation about its quality is phrased in such a way as to suggest that the university's past has been fine and terrific things are just around the corner: 'While UNE has a long history and strong tradition of academic distinction, our outlook is dynamic and fresh. Our focus is on the future.' Accordingly, 'enthusiastic and suitably qualified professionals' are invited 'to be a part of our energetic and innovative community dedicated to the rigorous pursuit of excellence'. Only the titles of jobs on offer are given. Of course, you can ask about what you will do and how much you will be paid, though the implication is that lifestyle is, or should be the primary consideration. No mention either of enthusiastic blowies in summer, rigorous winters in a valley swathed in wood smoke, and a one-train town.

For more dynamic, community-minded types, La Trobe University is the place of choice - at least in the Faculty of Education with its 'long and distinctive history of progressive and socially engaged teaching and research in education'. The university's success

is driven by people who are committed to making a difference. They are creative and highly motivated, pursue new ideas and create knowledge. Our teaching and research address some of the most significant issues of our time and we're passionate about driving change to benefit the communities we serve.

Latte-drinking cultural layabouts need not apply.

'All hands to the pumps' might summon educators to work at La Trobe. At Swinburne University of Technology, members of the senior echelon plot courses through organisational reefs. The University seeks a 'strategic leader to assume the newly created position of Executive Dean, Faculty of Health, Arts and Design', one who is 'strategically focussed'. Corraling that lot together has to require 'Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy' (as a Mao-era singing and dancing revolutionary war movie was called). A Dean of Health Sciences, also advertised, 'will contribute to the strategic development and management of the School's academic offerings, research profile, and student experience'; 'will provide strategic leadership to build new courses and research initiatives'; and 'will demonstrate exceptional strategic, analytical and conceptual skills ...'. In the same advertisement, 'Two Key Director positions' in the Faculty of Business and Enterprise are sought by this 'ambitious and strategic university'. As well as possessing all manner of qualities, strategic and instrumental, they will make their

gardens bloom by way of a whole lot of nurturing. The Director, Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, 'will nurture cross-disciplinary and collaborative research and significant funding, both within and beyond the Faculty ...'. As 'members of the Faculty Executive Management team, the appointees will nurture cross-disciplinary and collaborative research, generating high quality research output and attracting significant external research funding'. One grasps at a caution through a thicket of superlatives: beware the wrath of entrepreneurial gods.

## The executivisation of everyone?

Being at least as much to do with selling a university as with selling a job, an employment advertisement will start by displaying the place in taffeta and end by dressing the position in pin-stripe. In the latter respect, 'leader/leadership' and 'strategy/strategic' go together like a horse and carriage; and so it is when, through an executive search and leadership development outfit, the University of Western Australia seeks a Director, Marketing and Communications. 'With significant marketing and leadership experience' the Director 'will be responsible for planning, developing and implementing the university's marketing capability, strategy and communications' and will have 'demonstrated experience in developing and implementing comprehensive, integrated, engaging marketing strategies to diverse stakeholder groups'. Candidates 'should combine strategic, analytic and creative thinking with expert communication, collaboration and leadership skills'. To cap it all, the Director:

will have experience of driving a proactive marketing and communications function in similar strategic and operational contexts, and demonstrate the ambition to shape a long-term strategy that will enhance the University's international reputation, profile and network of relationships.

Not bad scores: two mentions of leadership and five of strategy/strategies/strategic. Warble them over and over and you'll entice entrants into your fairy bower.

Helped by another firm whose registered trademarks include 'cutting through complexity', Griffith University hopes to do so with its own Director of Marketing and Communications:

With four key direct reports and a team of 35 [!] staff, this significant leadership position works in close collaboration with members of the Vice Chancellor's executive team to ensure strategic branding, marketing and communications are in alignment with the University's strategic plan.

This Director 'will be responsible for ensuring the continued strengthening of the University's brand presence and profile' and 'will provide strategic and operational advice in relation to student recruitment, marketing, communications and media matters affecting the overall operation and reputation of the University'. In short, the executive team is to be assisted in severing Gordian knots of bad press by the Director's compositions.

Here is a third musical version: 'In 2013 we are seeking an experienced and influential Director to lead the Planning and Performance Measurement function at ANU into the future.' This is real upping the periscope and scanning the ocean stuff:

As Director, you will contribute to the enhancement of the University's overall performance and reputation through effective corporate planning, management of the business intelligence function and system, and delivery of critical data to support decision making.

#### Expectations are set.

Your ability to deliver effective management reporting, both to senior executive and to middle management, will be critical to your success, as will be your experience in facilitating corporate planning which delivers results. You will ensure an appropriate balance between the growth of the business intelligence function, and the delivery of the day to day statistical and analytical functions within the role.

Timely information and data are driving decisions and providing a competitive advantage more than ever before. This role will provide you with the platform to make a direct and significant contribution to ANU and its strategic direction.

Well may academics at the ANU ponder the significance of this position. For mention of 'the business intelligence function' brings to mind the launching of torpedoes in their direction after competitive shortcomings in teaching and research are spotted. A competitive advantage for the ANU over whom? However much some business decisions may be said to turn on securing competitive advantage, the wholesale adoption of that notion by universities is bound to involve them in races to the bottom.

To change slippers for a while, the job has been outsourced to the Vatican and only bishops need apply – preferably those with experience of finangling in Banco Ambrosiano or in Istituto per le Opere di Religione. A professor in the parish of biochemistry is, I suppose, a middle manager with expectations of dirigiste treatment by the new chum in planning. Perhaps religion fits better than business, or business and universities in turn have learnt from religion, for a tone of breathless enthusiasm, of excellences to the power of ten, of ecstatic frenzy per-

vades these advertisements. Starting work must lead to a big downer. It's about time for some executive-wallah to sue a university for raising false hopes in its advertisements.

Are we helped by turning universities into businesses? Administrative and financial operations must be well-managed. But to run the whole shebang that way is to muddle its reasons for being. Good administrators promote the academic climate of universities. Given expectations of them, Executive Deans, Directors and their ilk are liable to become their own and the university's worst enemies.

The following extract is taken from the job description of a Governance Coordinator:

In this role you will operate in both the political and organisational arenas and be responsible for the team that coordinates Council's corporate planning and reporting, prepares business papers and records minutes for Council and Standing Committee meetings. Additionally this position will chair Council's Corporate Management System steering group.

Not an advertisement for a position in a university but for one with a city council in New South Wales. Note that the appointee does not undertake specified tasks but is responsible for the team that coordinates them, which means that team-led worker ants do the humping and shoving. Like much that passes for executive work in universities, the position in question is stamped with a hands-off seal, and that underscores the gap between office holders and operatives.

It's not that universities have grown so big that they are obliged to indent a supercargo of executives. Rather, they have embraced the idea that middle and senior level academic and support posts have to be conceived in terms that may or may not be fitting to the conduct of mining companies and chicken processing plants, and, finally, that statements about vacancies have to be fitted with synthetic lures. A local supermarket has as motto: 'We serve to serve again.' If universities imagine that they enhance their credibility by having with-it attractants in their advertisements, then this one does better than 'Think Beyond' and 'Top 2% of Universities Worldwide' (Tasmania). Or 'Know More. Do More' and 'Ranked in the world's top 5 per cent' (Griffith). Or my favourite (because adjectival attributions mask your author's indifferent passage through its Arts degree) 'Your UQ. Your Advantage'. Responding to such inducements is to run the risk of buying a pig in a poke.

**Arthur O'Neill has been described as a retired gentleperson, but perhaps he has too much time on his hands.**

## References

- Coetzee, J. M. (2003). *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Viking/Penguin.
- O'Neill, A. (2002). Tough at the top? It's easier with an MBA. *Overland*, 167, Winter, 58–62.
- O'Neill, A. (2010). Reach for the stars. *Australian Universities' Review*, 52(2), 72–75.
- O'Neill, A. (2012). Grand crews: tasting notes on the Group of Eight universities. *Australian Universities' Review*, 54(2), 65–70.

## Sources

- 'You will provide innovative leadership ...':  
University of Newcastle, Associate Librarian (Research & Information Services). *The Sydney Morning Herald*, My Career, 21–22 September 2013, p. 24.
- 'A visionary and strategic leader ...':  
Monash University / Perrett Laver, Vice-Chancellor, Monash University. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 21 August 2013, p. 31.
- 'In another place ...':  
Griffith University / Heidrick & Struggles, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) & Deputy Vice Chancellor (Engagement). *The Australian*, Higher Education, 14 August 2013, p. 29.
- 'Slightly further down the ladder ...':  
Deakin University / Jo Fisher Executive Search, We're Looking for Worldly People & Pro Vice-Chancellor Faculty of Business and Law. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 2 October 2013, p. 29.
- 'It's onwards, ever upwards ...':  
University of Queensland / Rachel Lucas Consulting Search, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International). *The Australian*, Higher Education, 4 September 2013, p. 30.
- 'So La Trobe puts in its announcement ...':  
La Trobe University / Odgers Berndtson Executive Search, Head of School, Law. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 2 October 2013, p. 26.
- 'Deans have transmogrified ...':  
University of Queensland / Heidrick & Struggles, Executive Dean, Humanities and Social Sciences. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 16 October 2013, p. 25.
- 'Another new Faculty at the University ...':  
University of Queensland / Rachel Lucas Consulting Search, Executive Dean, Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 16 October 2013, p. 28.
- 'Staff are attracted ...':  
University of New England, Employment Opportunities at UNE. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 7 August 2013, p. 32, and 2 October 2013, p. 26. Advertising for two Associate University Librarians & Head of School of Rural Medicine.
- 'The university's success ...':  
La Trobe University, Associate Professor (Education). *The Australian*, Higher Education, 21 August 2013, p. 35.
- 'The university seeks ...':  
Swinburne University of Technology / Jo Fisher Executive Search, Executive Dean Faculty of Health, Arts and Design, Dean Health Sciences & Key Director positions. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 14 August 2013, p. 31, and 21 August 2013, p. 35.
- 'and so it is when ...':  
University of Western Australia / Crown & Marks Executive Search & Leadership Development, Director, Marketing & Communications. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 23 October 2013, p. 28.
- 'Helped by another firm whose registered trademarks include ...':  
Griffith University / KPMG, Director, Marketing and Communications. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 6 November 2013, p. 33.
- 'Here is another musical version ...':  
Australian National University, Director Planning and Performance Measurement. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 14 August 2013, p. 32.
- 'The following extract is taken ...':  
Lake Macquarie City Council, Governance Coordinator. *Sydney Morning Herald*, My Career, 21–22 September 2013, p. 24.
- 'If universities imagine that ...':  
University of Tasmania, Think Beyond and Do You Have a Global Urge? in a general announcement of positions that includes UTAS is ranked in the top 2% of universities worldwide. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 21 August 2013, p. 32, and Top 2% of Universities WORLDWIDE in call for applicants for PhD Scholarships in 2014. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 16 October 2013, p. 28.
- Or 'Know More. Do More ...':  
Griffith University, Professor of Population Health. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 16 October 2013, p. 28.
- 'Or my favourite ...':  
University of Queensland, Executive Dean, Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences. *The Australian*, Higher Education, 16 October 2013, p. 28.