

## DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

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THE Council appointed Working Group of The University of Melbourne has recently published some of its work in a Report to Council.<sup>1</sup> The Working Group consisted of 17 elected members broadly representative of the University. It was served by a secretariat headed by the author. The task of the Group was to recommend to the University Council the form, powers, and functions of a permanent consultative body whose purpose would be to achieve "agreement on the aims of the university . . . ; such changes in the structure, decision-making and educational processes of the university as will facilitate the realisation of the agreed aims; and a workable system of continuing evaluation of the achievements of the university". The permanent consultative body was not seen as an alternative to the existing administrative structure but rather as a method of initiating change independent of the structure.

Throughout its deliberations the Working Group was concerned *inter alia* with three important elements in the problem. These were the existing legal bureaucracy with its component educational and administrative systems, established mores, procedures and precedents; knowledge, insights and perceptions of the university derived from many internal and external sources; and the prosecution and completion of the task of formulating a permanent consultative body suitable for The University of Melbourne at this point in her history.

The Working Group considered a number of proposals of which important examples were "University Ombudsman", "Corporate Ombudsman", "Ombudsman and University Assembly", and the "Department of the University" (details of which are being progressively published), before finally recommending a body to be known as the University Assembly. The substance of the proposals has been accepted by Council.

The proposed University Assembly consists of an elected body of some 130-150 people drawn potentially from the whole of the University Community (those in all areas and at all levels with a substantial interest in the University).

\*Public Service Board, Government of Western Australia.

<sup>1</sup>Report to Council, Working Group, The University of Melbourne, 1973.

"The Assembly shall be a major forum for continuing evaluation by the University Community of the University's aims and achievements, and for open discussion on matters of general concern to that community. As such it will be primarily concerned

- (a) to initiate academic policies appropriate to this University;
- (b) to review academic policies being pursued in this University and to have the power to delay and refer back;
- (c) to consider the prosecution of academic policies in this University."

It was thus designed "as an anvil on which the form and process of the University would be continually reshaped", and to this end was given certain essential powers such as those to obtain information, seek assistance, and submit for consideration of the Council or other body recommendations with respect to the affairs and concerns of the University.

The proposal would appear to herald a significant advance in the extension of participatory democracy in university governance and it provides a powerful mechanism whereby evolutionary change can be initiated from within the institution without the prior necessity of making amendments to an enabling Act or Statutes. It has the important feature of retaining the existing legal power and authority structure—perhaps indefinitely—but at least until such time as it is progressively replaced by modifications which are seen to be in the best interests of, and are openly appraised by, the whole institutional community.

NEED FOR UNIVERSITY KNOWLEDGE INSIGHTS  
AND UNDERSTANDING

The author's studies and the deliberations of the Group and its members highlighted the absence of and need for accurate and relevant data and understanding concerning the purposes, operation and activities of the University and universities generally. It is essential that such information be made available and widely understood if informed debate on desired and meaningful change and action is to take place in Melbourne University's proposed permanent consultative body. No existing agency or group or agencies either within or without the University possesses now the range of insights and expertise which it is necessary to have to properly and fully enquire at a creditable University level into the functioning of the University (or any university) as a total complex socio-technical educational system.

Many universities have, however, established, or are contemplating establishing, higher education units whose function is to examine mutual learning activities with a view to enhancing their



effectiveness—as recommended in the Australian Universities Commission's Fifth Report. However, their existing or proposed functions are unnecessarily restricted thus limiting their value. A ready extension of the limited notion of self-appraisal of teaching and closely related fields would be the establishment of a "Department of the University" with a mandate: To seek and disseminate knowledge and insights concerning all aspects of the University so that the operation and activities of the University may be progressively and continuously improved on the basis of appropriate scholarly understanding and debate.

In connection with this concept the Working Group Secretariat and members considered statements on the total nature of the university as an organised system in a community, and on the problems that confront those concerned with action to initiate urgently needed and beneficial evolutionary change. Many feel that the level of debate on the universities needs to be raised. This may be done by applying to study of the university itself suitable processes of advanced scholarship and teaching. The preponderance of current decision-making on the basis of much ill-informed predominantly "lay" opinion is being accompanied progressively by a decline in the efficiency of the universities.

#### BASIC STATEMENTS ABOUT A UNIVERSITY

The disciplinary field of concern for a Department of the University and the need for its establishment, may be outlined on the basis of the following statements.

(a) *Complex socio-technical educational system*

There is need to study the university as a whole advanced didactic system and to understand the interrelationships between its various components and estates. The teaching/learning activities and psychosocial factors can only be understood if they are studied in relation to the technological and administrative systems and the enterprises overall (not necessarily congruent) objectives in the context of its total environment.

(b) *University as an open system*

It is not adequate to consider the university, or any part of it, or any single activity, as closed and isolated. Rather it must be seen to be an organisation whose many parts possess blurred interfaces and are constantly interacting with their environments. This must be taken into account in studying its problems.

(c) *Principle of organisational choice*

It is important to obtain a measure of the appropriateness of the matches between organisation structure, activities and decision-making processes for the various educational, administrative and service systems within the enterprise.

(d) *Importance of virtually autonomous groups and estates within a university*

A major feature of a university is the high degree of near-autonomous and stable as well as frequently changing groupings that need to be considered.

(e) *Sense of alienation from influential estates*

To many in universities there are (or appear to be) lack of opportunities to participate in discussions and decision-making on matters that bear directly upon central daily work tasks. This is having a progressively adverse effect upon morale and motivation to work.

(f) *Barriers to change*

There is a perceived recognition by university "leaders" that some traditional and current systems and procedures are presenting serious obstacles to expeditious and desirable reforms. There is widespread misunderstanding and ignorance, even within the University Community itself, concerning University functions and activities.

(g) *Preservation of appropriate traditions during a period of change*

It is recognised that what is desired is informed opinion and a structure and system that will preserve acceptable traditional practices and values and also allow the university to accommodate smoothly to the many complex changes that are envisaged during the future indefinite period of social, technological and educational change.

(h) *Importance of satisfying personal participation in the university community*

It is felt that the following propositions concerning university participants are applicable:

- (i) the content of university work at all levels should be reasonably demanding and provide for some variety and adequate personal satisfaction;
- (ii) there is a need for all individuals to know what their jobs are and how they are performing;



- (iii) there is a need for most to be able to develop and learn continually;
- (iv) most people need areas of decision-making where discretion may be exercised;
- (v) there is a need for social support and recognition by the university;
- (vi) there is a need to relate personal activities within the university to personal activities in the community;
- (vii) there is a need to feel that the outcome of properly pursued activities will lead to a satisfactory personal future.

Many aspects of these propositions are not adequately recognised or catered for under existing arrangements.

#### DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

There is a widespread feeling that university problems should be more effectively tackled and that the need to do this is urgent.

Many of the areas, problems and needs outlined above could be studied effectively in a properly constituted Department of the University, thus bringing together, consolidating and extending, the currently fragmented and disparate work in the field.

#### *Aims and Purposes*

The broad aims of such a Department of the University would be:

- (a) To serve, study and teach about the university, and universities in general, as major educational and social institutions and societal change agents.
- (b) To do research on the basic problems and nature of the university today and in the years ahead.
- (c) To assume the normal role of a university teaching department.
- (d) To act as the central consultancy and change initiating agency for the development of the university and hence the self-renewal of society.

The more specific purposes would be:

- (a) To establish the multiple and multivalued aims of the university, both educational and in relation to the needs and expectations of the community at large.
- (b) To promote such changes in the structure, decision-making and educational processes of the university as will facilitate the realisation of the agreed aims.
- (c) To devise a workable system of continuing evaluation by the

university of its achievements in relation to these aims, and of remaining receptive to views concerning them as these may change over time.

- (d) To initiate and conduct discussions and research of a kind likely to assist it in its purposes, for example:
  - (i) by obtaining relevant material on the existing perceptions of university aims and functions, as held by those within and outside the university;
  - (ii) by initiating research into existing structural elements and decision-making processes of the university that might inhibit beneficial change;
  - (iii) by devising mechanisms whereby university curricula and teaching methods could be continually appraised and acceptably maintained.

#### SOME IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

A Department of the University being required initially to address itself to the current situation should be mindful of the following factors:

- (a) The University is an organisation faced with a multiplicity of tasks—the dissemination and discovery of knowledge, professional and general education and training, the provision of humanly satisfying learning experiences and the fostering the growth and maturation of all participants.
- (b) There is a wide range of levels at which the substantive and supporting tasks adumbrated in (a) above are required to be performed—undergraduate, postgraduate, post-doctoral tasks in the academic disciplines, together with tasks in administration, the faculties, and the departments, and in the affiliated colleges, as well as those undertaken by the supporting staff.
- (c) There are constant tensions—for instance those arising from conflicts between the requirements of the prime substantive activities associated with teaching/learning and innovative research, and the administration of these activities.
- (d) The many different systems—e.g., teaching/learning, research, information, accounting—require different operational boundaries—consequently there are overlapping and interlocking systems.
- (e) The Charter, or enabling Acts and derivative Statutes and Regulations, play an important part in regulating the affairs of the University.
- (f) Individual members and groups within the University are



normally familiar with and professionally competent within but small parts of its operations and activities.

- (g) Existing statements concerning universities and their objectives and organisations convey but simple views of their decision-making and decision-implementing *modus operandi*.
- (h) It may not be possible, nor necessarily is it even desirable, to obtain agreement on all institutional goals in such complex institutions; for many individuals it appears likely that there will always remain a substantial lack of congruence between individual and institutional values and objectives.
- (i) There is pressing need for more people to know and to be informed about universities at a level commensurate with operational responsibilities.

Thus in pursuit of its aims and purposes the Department could teach and conduct studies which used the theories and methodologies of the behavioural, educational, management and social sciences. It could seek to discover and disseminate new viewpoints on general tertiary educational problems—for it is not to be expected that it will confine its attentions to the universities alone. It would have the capacity to train a substantial number of under and postgraduate students in the fields of administration, accountancy, economics, education, governance, political science, psychology and sociology and change management, and provide models for understanding the nature of other complex social and industrial institutions with itself as a leading exemplar. To test its own effectiveness it could commence operations as a fully accountable unit with staff on limited tenure and with a future related to its own performance as appraised by the University Community.

#### Powers

The Department with the duties of acting as a university change agent and assuming also some of the roles of the proposed permanent consultative body would need powers appropriate to its functions. These should include:

- (a) Power of access to the many internal and external sources of information, whether documentary or otherwise, necessary to its tasks; and power to store, retrieve and use this information.
- (b) Right of access to all formal documents and meetings of the University.
- (c) Power to cause the review (through a University Assembly if appropriate) of all decisions made in the University.
- (d) Power to question, call for reports and evidence.

- (e) Right to require bodies to react to its reports, documents or recommendations.
- (f) The powers of a normal university department.
- (g) The right to use itself and the university as a research laboratory.
- (h) Such other powers as are appropriate to its functions.

#### Staff

It will be necessary to support the needs of a normal small multi-disciplinary university department. An adequate staff complement would be:

Head of Department .. ..	\$19,000	
Readers (1-3) .. .. .	\$16,000	— \$48,000
Senior Lecturers/Lecturers (4)		\$54,000
Tutors/Assistants (2-4) ..	\$16,000	— \$40,000
Secretaries (4) .. .. .		\$24,000
Contingencies .. .. .	\$50,000	— \$60,000
<b>TOTAL .. .. .</b>	<b>\$179,000</b>	<b>— \$245,000</b>

For a university the size of Melbourne or Sydney this represents circa one per cent of annual recurrent expenditure. This may be compared with the Research and Development expenditure of a company: it is a modest amount by comparison with that in many enterprises.

From the complex multi and transdisciplinary nature of its work such a department would require as its head an officer with suitable educational experience and sufficient standing who could lead a team embracing the outlined field to do with objectives, course and curriculum development, learning environment design, organisation structure, administration and finance.

By comparison with the large sums devoted to university and other tertiary education, which are often committed in an *ad hoc* manner on the basis of most slender evidence as to need, the amount required to enhance understanding of one institution, and by inference all similar institutions, would be very small in relation to potential benefits and savings throughout the university and tertiary educational system.

#### Conclusion

The Department of the University's work and findings would be available to the whole university (and other institutions) and the community as a source of much needed insights and information, and teaching and research skills. In many cases such depart-



ments could be developed from existing tertiary teaching/learning units with but a relatively small outlay of additional expenditure.

In summary the Department of the University would possess the following characteristics:

- (a) Goals parallel to those of the university as a perpetual body corporate.
- (b) A substantive role of transmission, storage and generation of knowledge, skills and insights concerning the university.
- (c) Consultancy capacity at all levels for all kinds of short- and long-term university problems.
- (d) Capacity for substantial potential beneficial change influence over all estates and elements of the university and the community generally.

All tertiary learning institutions, particularly the universities, are in need of change. The relevance of debate and the direction of change is more likely to be sharpened and made more cogent if it is based upon knowledge and understanding. Will one university (perhaps the proposed Australian Open University?) have the courage and the foresight to place its own total activities under the cutting edge of an educational surgeon's scalpel so that the University Community and the community at large may reap the likely substantial benefits?

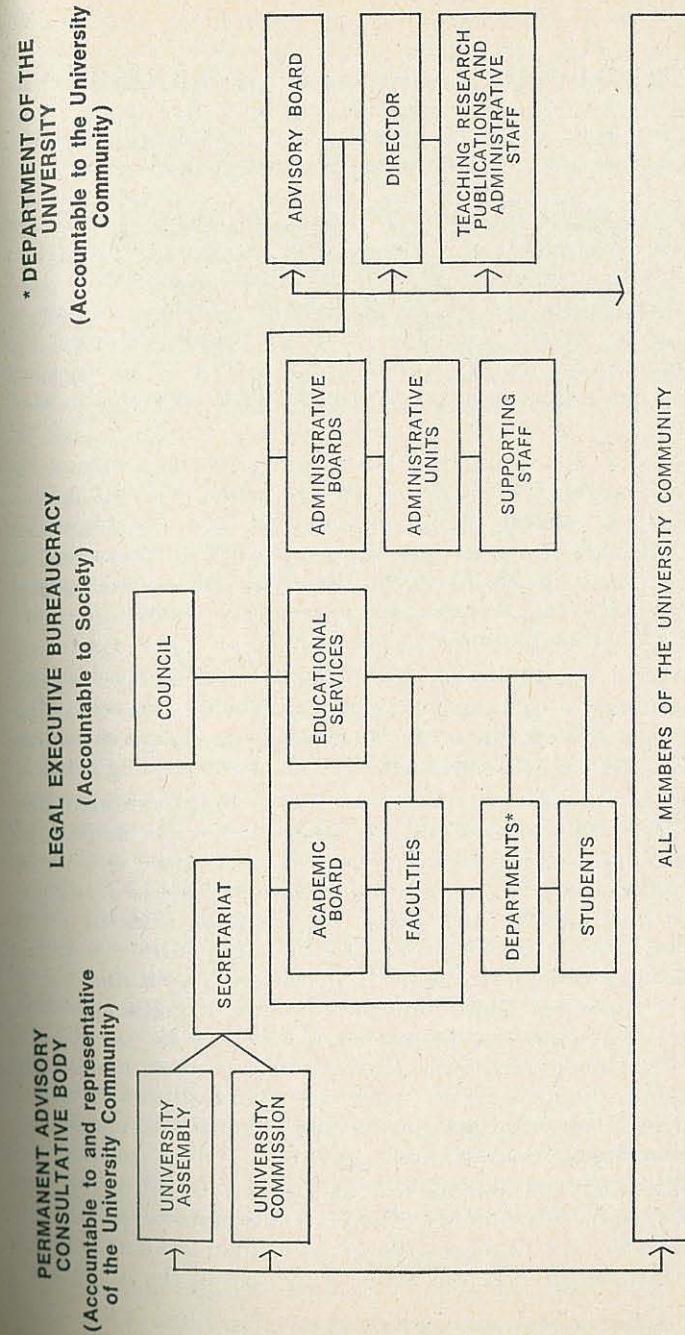


FIGURE 1. TRIPARTITE UNIVERSITY ORGANISATION

Basic Tripartite Model of a University organisation with three elements—the legal bureaucracy, a consultative participative assembly, and a professional source of insight and understanding about the University, the Department of the University.