



Association for Tertiary Education Management

Submission to Review of Australian Higher Education Response to Discussion Paper June 2008

The Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM) provides high quality professional development programs for managers and administrators in tertiary education institutions in Australia and New Zealand. Established in 1976, ATEM continues to provide a focus for its members to develop their skills and knowledge to be able to work effectively in, and to make strong contributions to, their institutions, and a recent strategy workshop clarified ATEM's role around 'enhancing the professionalism of tertiary education management'.

ATEM is now collaborating with the LH Martin Institute of Higher Education Leadership and Management in these aims, and jointly publishes the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* (ranked by the ARC in the top 20% of refereed journals internationally in its draft journal ranking list for the Excellence in Research initiative).

The Discussion Paper highlights a number of critical issues facing Australian higher education: the nature of higher education, meeting labour market and industry needs, participation, the student experience, connections, Australia's higher education sector in an international context, its contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural capital, resourcing the system and governance and regulation. ATEM's role, focus and expertise precludes it from commenting specifically on a number of these issues. Instead, ATEM responds to the issues raised in the Discussion Paper as a whole, and from the perspective of its members who work in the institutions that make up the higher education sector in Australia.

No matter what structural, governance and financial arrangements are put in place to develop diverse, high performing institutions with a global focus, the performance of higher education institutions has always depended, and will continue to depend, on the quality of its staff.

The Review discussion paper refers to the visible issue of the aging of the academic workforce, but this is a surface issue which belies a more deep-rooted set of issues relating to how staff in universities see their roles in those institutions.

For Australian institutions to have a global focus, staff need to have a global focus. While such a focus will take different forms at different levels of any institution, all staff need to ensure they understand the sector in which they work, its drivers of change, and how their institutions are positioned externally – that is, staff will need to develop a strong external understanding about their work and their roles, and how they are changing over time.

The demands on staff in universities today are heavy. Most staff report being time poor, facing competing priorities and often feeling overwhelmed by the volume of work to be completed. The result is an understandable tendency to focus inwards, on the job, and on working out how to survive on a day to day basis. An external focus is often not seen as a priority, nor do staff feel they have the time to build, sustain and develop such a focus. The Tertiary Education Management Conference, run jointly by ATEM and the Tertiary Education Facilities Managers Association (TEFMA), provides an opportunity for staff to develop an external picture, with conference attendees frequently commenting on the value of getting a bird's eye view of the sector at the conference, thus making their work more meaningful.

Yet, if institutions are to contribute to innovation and to a global knowledge economy, staff **must** see knowledge about the external environment in which they operate, as a critical competency. Building the capability – both as individuals and collectively as institutions - to understand how to both identify and respond to changes in that environment now and into the future should be at the foundation of management and leadership training in the sector. Such an external focus provides a 'big picture' and 'long picture' context within which day-to-day work and decision making is undertaken. Without this external focus, decision making becomes focused on the detail rather than the strategic, and the capacity to be innovative decreases.

The implications of the aging staff demographic is most often viewed as an exodus of experienced and trained staff. Higher education institutions and the Australian government must plan more systematically for this and not just be surprised when it happens because the risks that staff shortages present are now being widely reported (see for example, Scott et al, 2008 p vii-viii). That means specific and focussed programs to prepared younger staff to move more rapidly through the ranks in institutions, to be positioned and to have some of the experience needed to replace those who will be leaving. In addition, institutions will need to be going to the market to bring in professional staff who are experienced in another industry and/or country, but who will need induction and upgrading of knowledge about the business of higher education in Australia. This group of staff will need training and education programs to prepare for a life a leading and managing institutions should be planned now and funded accordingly.

The Review may want to also consider how the changing nature and scope of work in universities today has rendered obsolete the way in which government views the university workforce – broadly, as academic and non-academic staff. Recent research (Whitchurch, 2007) suggests that such classifications, which might be convenient for statistical reporting purposes, represent neither the complexity nor the reality of work in universities today. Specifically, the use of the official term 'non-academic' to describe university staff who do not have an academic role is at best unhelpful. At issue is that within this cohort of staff, who make up 50% of the university workforce, lie many different roles and professions which are hidden from view under the current umbrella term. The situation is made even more confusing as many staff are making the transition from academic to management and vice-versa, or are working in what Whitchurch terms 'the third space' where traditional interpretations of work roles do not apply.

On an individual basis, and in faculties and at the 'coal face', recent work undertaken by Conway (2008), suggests that the work of this group of staff is indeed valued, yet the government persists in using archaic terms to describe them in its statistical and other reports. The sector and the profession are ahead of the government in this respect, since many institutions now use the term 'professional staff' rather than 'non-academic' to describe managers and administrators. Just as the Review is exploring the connections between the higher and vocational education sectors, it might also consider the shifting and changing connections between staff in institutions, as a starting point to ensure that the knowledge and skills of **all** staff in institutions is used to build a stronger innovation capacity for the sector.

The ongoing concern expressed here by ATEM is about how the roles of this significant group of staff can be made visible and how the contributions they already make, separately and in concert with academic staff, can be appropriately recognised, valued and leveraged.

Such professional staff fall into a variety of groups – some are part of 'the administration', and need to learn to administer higher education institutions in a way that is different from administration in other organisations. Some are professional staff in the sense that they have an orientation towards a profession that is the same whether inside or outside of higher education institutions. These staff have connections and loyalties towards their own professions and professional associations, which have specific requirements for practising and membership that need to be met. A third group are those who have come from those two other groups, and also from among academic staff, and who manage higher education institutions from middle management through to senior executive levels. Each of these groups must receive ongoing and progressive education and skills training if their institutions are to thrive in the times ahead – and that requires focussed and dedicated funding.

Issues such as building an external focus for staff, and building a more accurate view of university work and the roles played by staff, are part of the process of reshaping Australian tertiary education being explored by the Review.

There is no wider external focus for the higher education sector in Australia than its nation building capability and so it is crucial that the outcomes of the Review provide leadership and a plan to value and adequately resource and support the work of the higher education sector in the globally competitive times we are witnessing. ATEM is looking to the Review process to make clear to us all how universities will operate to be competitive into the future, and do this in a way that will make the imperative for change in focus, perspective and work roles clear for both institutions and individual staff.

References

- Conway, M. (2008 forthcoming), *Exploring the Academic Administrator Divide: Myth or Reality?*
Whitchurch, C. (2007) The Changing Roles and Identifies of Professional Managers in *UK Higher Education, Perspectives*, 11 (2): pp 53-60.