

A UWA Academic Staff Association Forum
WHAT QUALITIES ARE IMPORTANT IN OUR NEXT VICE-CHANCELLOR?
Thursday 3 NOVEMBER 12 pm – 1 pm Austin Lecture Theatre, Arts Faculty
Chair: Ray da Silva Rosa, UWAASA President

Diverse disciplines were represented. The Chair welcomed attendees - including four members of Senate, Sue Boyd, Sato Juniper, Maddie Mullholland and Jamie O'Shea - and advised that the Chancellor, Dr Michael Chaney, had requested a summary of proceedings. The Chair noted it is likely the summary would inform the Chancellor and the Senate of the qualities academic staff would like to see in our next Vice-Chancellor and, indirectly, their vision and hopes for the university.

This summary identifies principal themes/points of view. Some views, pithily-expressed, are presented verbatim.

MORALE BUILDER

“So, someone who builds morale between the staff and executive.”

A LEADER WHO TAKES PEOPLE WITH THEM.

“it seems to me that management has something to do with resources and things and, and leadership is something to do with staffing and people. And I think what we've been experiencing a lot of the time is the management approach to people”

A nuanced discussion ensued on whether it was necessary for the Vice Chancellor to be an academic and have an engrained affinity with UWA. It was noted that Glyn Davis (UMelbourne VC), widely regarded as outstanding, entered university administration from the Queensland public service and has been able to effect significant change and still have all staff saying “we” rather than “us and them”. The key is that the next VC work hard to establish a sense of common interests, and have an understanding and appreciation of the distinctive history and sense of place of UWA. Tellingly, this sentiment was articulated by persons who migrated to WA and had lived here for considerable time and now identified strongly with UWA.

It's important that the VC be very open to going out around the campus and finding out more about the institution and not come in with principally a sense of what they bring to the institution and what they can do and be in a big hurry to implement that change. Glyn Davis' record shows you gain a license to effect change when people intuit you share their interests. Several people were keen to underscore this point should not be confused with a preference for the next VC being affable.

“if you're a leader you have followers. If you don't have followers, then you're not actually a leader; you're somebody else. You're in the position but you may not be leading. So we're really concerned about who we get is quite smart in his history, and his aspirations. And not just staying as we are, because it would be hard, but gather us up and taking us onwards.”

“And that's the bit that I think is really critical and I think it goes to building respect, ... listen, and be listening in 100 ways; listening for the thing that gets that person excited and remembering that thing and bringing that excitement into another conversation and building the things to people treat people like that. So being out and about and knowing the people, knowing what turns them on, and you don't do that by telling people things.”

“Maybe the question of what are the ideal qualities in terms of the Vice-Chancellor is also what are the ideal qualities in terms of the management team at the university? This is maybe the broader question”

POLITICAL QUALITIES

“My sense is that the Vice-Chancellor should represent the desires, will, the political will of the staff, the students, the alumni community to the broader political class, and not just represent the will of the political class to the university”

“An ability to grapple with what really makes us unique, not just another pale version of Stanford or whatever we’re going to compare ourselves to.”

“It would be nice to have someone who didn’t use exclusively the language, the discourse of business ... there are other discourses around the campus that could be used”

“It’s often believed business is antithetical to universities but let’s not forget that UWA was the British Empire’s first free university and the founder, Sir John Winthrop Hackett, was a businessman”

“I actually would want a Vice-Chancellor who is committed to state funding ... I mean of tertiary education in a way that it’s not at present in Australia, and that it’s moving in a direction away from that. And I would want a Vice-Chancellor who is brave in that respect to talk against that trend”

“The commitment to a public university is as important as emotional intelligence. And, the vision of a university should not be driven by the model of the corporation as the ideal organisation. So it’s not so much about emotional intelligence as about this sort of vision. I would be happy to have both but I would distinguish between them.”

“Would it be worth beginning the document by invoking our motto, “Seek Wisdom”, and saying that what we seek is a wise leader who gets what’s unique about this place, our heritage? We don’t want just a manager... but to seek to once more reinstate the value of wisdom.”

APPOINTMENT PROCESS

“I also wondered what the process was because you know, like many of us, I’m fairly concerned that it’s happened very quickly. We know that there’s interviews meant to be taking place in December, you know, who that person might be. That just doesn’t sound ... to use a better word, that doesn’t seem at all wise given the difficulties of the last few years in particular”

The Chair asked if UWA Senate member, Dr Sue Boyd, could respond:

Dr Boyd (in summary): “The Chancellor was of the view that it would be very good to have the Vice Chancellor in position as quickly as possible and so he did not want there to be any delay in getting on with the search.

The leading search firms keep their lists of available people updated so there is in fact here quite a strong field that, that can be mined, if I can use that that term. And then, if you’ve got some candidates you’re interested in, you bring them on campus for a few days and you get them to talk to people and they can listen to people and people can listen to them and they can get a handle on what the whole place is about.

There’s a good swag of members of senate who are actually on the selection committee.”

NB: *the Senate Selection Committee took advice from the search consultant on the schedule and was assured that timing was sufficient to attract a strong national and international field.*

Sato Juniper (UWA Senate member): “The Chancellor has acknowledged that it would be appropriate to provide the senate the shortlist of candidates.”

The forum concluded at this point.

A number of people sent their apologies and some forwarded a list of the qualities they would like to see in UWA's next Vice Chancellor along with comments. These are copied below.

QUALITIES IN A VICE CHANCELLOR

The Ideal Vice Chancellor

1. Is an **Academic**
 2. Upholds the ideal of the **University**
 3. Understands that **realistic goals** are the friend and not the enemy of ambition
 4. Values **students** in terms not reducible to a dollar figure
 5. **Communicates** difficult decisions even when, especially when, they are difficult to communicate
 6. Realises that communication begins with **listening**
 7. Sees academic **staff as co-owners** in a shared venture
 8. Imagines their University as a single, common good (a '**commonwealth**')
 9. Is cognisant of material constraint but makes decisions based ultimately in a common good (a **social and ecological commons**)
 10. Treats the University as the **servant of the community** (state, nation, world) and not the servant of the market
 11. Prefers **clear pathways** to empty slogans
 12. Is prepared to risk failure so as to build trust, autonomy and **intellectual bravery**
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Some of the qualities I'd like to see in the next Vice Chancellor of UWA are as follows:

1. She/he thinks of the University as a civic institution

This means s/he is of the view that:

- The first, fundamental purpose of a university is the fostering of civil society;
 - "What is a good society?" is the question that *is* the work of a university and which should underpin all work done by a university.
 - Ideas are a primary currency
 - Critique is a primary currency
 - Money has instrumental and not primary value;
 - The commercial company is an inappropriate explicit or implicit model for a university.
2. She/he is committed to state funding of universities.

This means s/he is of the view that:

- Universities are part of the civic infrastructure of a good society and should be built with public resources
- Part of his/her role is to work to maintain and increase the level of public funding of universities
- Part of his/her role is to reset public discussion about the need for public funding of universities. This means part of his/her role is to speak publicly about this need whether or not a particular claim for public funding is perceived to be winnable.

3. She/he thinks of the University as a critical enterprise and institution.

This means that s/he is of the view that:

- Criticism underpins what a university is and does; that it is a primary academic practice, orientation and responsibility.
- A university's role is to criticise (to critically evaluate) society
- To not criticise is to not be a university
- The Humanities are foundational to a university
- Innovation is inappropriate as the primary value underpinning a university because sometimes innovation is required for a good society and sometimes it is not.

4. She/he understands the Vice Chancellor's role to be one among equals.

This means that s/he is of the view that:

- The University comprises all who participate in it
- Academics are at the heart of what the University is and should be central to decision making
- When s/he speaks for the University s/he should speak in a way that represents those who participate in it.
- The idea that there is a University as an entity distinct from those who participate in it, and in particular distinct from its academics, is inappropriate.

THE NEW VICE CHANCELLOR SHOULD HAVE:

1. A first-order commitment to Academic Freedom
2. An understanding that the University is not a corporation, and that corporate and market-based metaphors (students-are-customers, etc; researchers as grant-seeking entrepreneurs; teachers as service providers) are inappropriate to the University as an institution. This applies not just to UWA, but to the very idea of a University.
3. A commitment to the understanding that education is a public good, not a private good.
4. A deep commitment to collegiality and to both listen to, and publicly represent the staff.
5. A willingness to challenge current neoliberal orthodoxies about the purpose of the university as handmaiden to industry or the economy.
6. A willingness to publicly underscore the University's role in producing pure research — that is, research with no immediate, easily foreseen instrumental use in service to the state or private industry.

CRITERIA FOR A V-C:

- 1 A secure undertaking that the candidate will have a breadth of academic and cultural experience suitable to respect, support and foster ALL the existing disciplines that represent UWA;
- 2 An explicit commitment on the part of the candidate to academic criteria for promoting, disseminating and managing the university, rather than corporate or business indicators;
- 3 Acceptance of two-way scrutiny (if we are to be judged by Socrates, SPOT and SURF, **Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?**)
- 4 The re-introduction of a responsive management system that does better than hold briefings that masquerade as focus groups but exist to require the rubber-stamping of decisions already made behind closed door.

THE TWO ASSETS I WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN AN IDEAL VC WOULD BE;

Collegial (in the real sense, not simply addressing your workers as colleagues)
An academic with academic interest in at least their own discipline, if not every discipline, not a businessperson (in all the senses that entails).
Perhaps we could suggest a KPI of getting out of the chancellery and walking the length of the campus once a month?

QUALITIES IN A VICE CHANCELLOR

For my part, I'd like to see greater attention at this University to environmental sustainability in the design and use of infrastructure and, while respecting academic freedom, to opening a discussion about how the University invests in fossil fuel industries. I think a VC has a role to play in fostering this discussion.

Selection Committee Gender Bias

I recall that when the last VC was appointed there were NO females on the selection committee. Think there were none but perhaps was one - not sure as so long ago. However, I recall that Lyn Beazly made a well justified issue about this at the time. Just would like to ensure that that there is indeed a good balance this time.

Various Comments

The discourse is dominated by a certain understanding of what is important in Universities and, in this way, any concerns of staff, students and academics that are outside the dominant discourse are marginalised.

Don't you think it's a bit optimistic to believe that anything we say will make the slightest bit of different to those charged with making the decision about the next VC? (As it is, the short timeline will make it hard to get anyone other than an internal candidate. People have to give notice, etc. Looks like everything is being done in a rush, yet again.)