

ACADEMIC THINKING ON AN IDEAL UWA

Respect, Support, Freedom and Community

*A Paper canvassing the views of Academics at UWA in 2014
Commissioned by the UWA Academic Staff Association*



**What Academics Want: Respect, Support, Freedom and Community.
Academic Thinking on an Ideal UWA**

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Introduction: The Academics

The phrase ‘it’s just academic’ obscures the fact that academics are more than just scholars, teachers and/or researchers. They are accidental anthropologists, informed observers of a way of life, the life of a university. This paper on an Ideal UWA presents voices of academics across the campus, their critique of the University as they currently see it, followed by ideas for positive change. We thank the sixty two who took the time to contribute their views on what it is about UWA that makes it an ideal university, or what would make it an ideal university from an academic perspective. Contributors came from three research centers and each of the faculties, though a majority of the latter came from either Arts or Science. The sixty two contributors included twelve Winthrop Professors, eleven Professors, fifteen Associate Professors, fourteen Assistant Professors, two Lecturers, two DECRA Fellows, two PhDs, one Professorial Fellow, one Research Associate, one Senior Honorary Research Fellow and one Adjunct Professor. Thirty eight of the contributors were men, twenty four women [1]. UWAASA thanks them for their willingness to share their thoughts with us all. The wealth of ideas and suggestions of this relatively small segment of the university community is overwhelming, both in the richness of its content and the articulate and considered way in which it was expressed, and we regret that we cannot publish everything that everyone had to say. We think it likely that what these sixty two academics have shared with us about what a university can and should be is just the tip of the iceberg. Academics have much to offer on the basis of their grounded experience of university life. A university wishing to remain dynamic and relevant, while honoring its history and maintaining what has been the best of its traditions of teaching, research and service, can rest assured that its academics are not simply a source of knowledge and expertise in their own fields but also have much to say about how to create a university in which academics can offer the best of themselves. Of course, the value that UWA administrations place on this knowledge depends on how central they see academics to its future.

Critiques: Respect, Support, Freedom and Community

In conversations, academics were asked to simply talk about what they imagined an ideal UWA would be like. The excerpts that follow here, and in the rest of this paper, are either a reconstruction of notes taken in conversations with contributors or more or less direct quotes from written submissions. They have been chosen for presentation for a variety of reasons: because they are a succinct expression of a theme touched on by many; because they provide an example of a common experience or complaint, or because they express an experience or idea that we think is a useful one. We have also included excerpts representing minority viewpoints.

Among other things, academics have ideas about just what a university is and does:

The university is a source and distributor of knowledge, a repository as well. We should produce new knowledge and keep and store what we’ve already got and let people have access to it, though teaching and various outreach programs. That’s our core role. And I suppose, a university should be a safe haven for thinking, that protects free thinking, independent of political constraint so you can develop knowledge, not opinion or propaganda. A place that protects academic freedom.
(Arts M2)

An ideal would be that we retain a sense of what a university is for, beyond a corporate entity. We're about knowledge, retaining it and transmitting it. (Science H3)

A university should be a nexus, a place for controversial debate, interaction, encounters across disciplines, curiosity, timely conversations. (Science T2)

A university should be a venerable institution, a centre of culture, a topical discussion, a place where minds meet, and where teacher and student meet. (This latter cannot be substituted by online teaching – empathetic interpersonal relations are the basis of good teaching and learning). A university should set standards in the community – not just of intellectual fertility but also of environmental sustainability of equitable workplace relations, of equal opportunity, of cultural performance and creativity. Its staff are its greatest resource and should be treated with care and dignity. (Arts J3) [2]

Much of what the contributors to the Ideal UWA project saw as ideal may be summed up by the four words in the second part of the title: respect, support, freedom and community. Yet, judging from these comments there is a widespread perception among UWA academics (including researchers) that they are neither understood—much less respected -- supported or trusted to act as responsible agents by the administrative layers that increasingly direct and constrain what they do. Some contributors spoke about those who occupy administrative positions as managers ignorant of or indifferent to academic goals. Academics are frustrated by infrastructure and processes that do not serve their needs, that prevent them from getting on with activities they value and making changes they believe that their teaching or research requires. Some intensely dislike having their time wasted in seemingly nonsensical administrative tasks. The following are examples of the kinds of things contributors had to say [1]:

Frustration number one is time. The university wastes people's resources: my time is often completely wasted on non-academic matters, signing things nobody needs to sign, so many transactions required, they really take up time. In an ideal university we wouldn't have to do this, we would be doing teaching and research or anything that requires an academic assessment. (Engineering T1)

We need to break the current 'straightjacket' of having to shape all our research towards a set of arcane 'league tables' for academic journals. (Business V2)

Remember how the administration used to be there to help the academics, now academics are there to help the administration. (Science K2)

An ideal university shouldn't be seduced by commercialism, managerialism, the glassy eyed euphoria of IT people who impose online things on all of us; it shouldn't constantly be seeking the entrepreneurial, the new, the shallow and uninteresting, passing fads. (Arts L3)

A big problem is a lack of trust. Those responsible for performing duties that generate income for the university -- teaching and research -- are not trusted sufficiently to enable them to do their work efficiently. It goes through the whole system. There is an absurd waste of time. (Arts K3)

We need better communication between the Senate and staff. Currently, staff have no power. Every Senator should have to shadow us to know exactly what we do. Right now they don't have a clue. I say, don't sit on the Senate until you've done shadowing. (Research Centre S2)

We need heads of department and senior management to act as advocates for academics; not just be passive recipients of policies pushed down their throats. Deans are now no more than corporate executives who are more interested in furthering their own careers. (Law W1)

Alternatively many of the contributors to this project would like greater autonomy to get on with the things they believe an ideal university should do.

Academia is a calling, your life derives meaning from. It is not just a job but a state of being and thinking, critiquing the world at large. But this is being squeezed out of the system by performance measures, an oppressive management tool. (Law I1)

Academics are highly self-motivated. We don't need crude incentiveisation. We need to re-empower people, give people agency. (Arts F2)

There is an emphasis on short term productivity. We need time to let things simmer. Ideally the university would recognize an academic's rhythm; it's not a straight line, not constant. We need periods of time for mulling things over, then a lag, then things start coming out'. (Arts C1)

I am worried this won't be a place where you can change things. Some courses need longer time periods for teaching. The new straightjackets kill the way we can train our students in ways that make us proud. (Engineering F3)

An ideal university would recognize and be more respectful of diversity; everybody contributes in their own way. Don't marginalize and put people in hierarchies. That makes an ugly workplace. (Arts R1)

UWA should provide a space where people are safe and free, where they can seek internal excellence. (Administration E2)

I support freedom of speech, academic freedom. We must have the ability to offend, but, of course, we must be responsible. We need an arena for these things to occur. (Medicine G2)

There has been a systematic deskilling and deprofessionalising of us as academics. We think of ourselves as a vocation and we are treated as if we are doing a job. (Science G3)

In an ideal university there would be appropriate support for activities and programs that advance academics' concerns as researchers, scholars and teachers:

The work of the university is teaching and research. And the only reason for employing anyone who does not do teaching and/or research is to support and assist staff who do. We need support staff, not professional administrators! (Science W2)

We need more predictability, it's the funding structures, you don't know how many tutes and lectures you are going to have to do until just before the semester begins. (Arts D1)

We feel that mentoring is an important part of developing research potential. Financial support for early and mid-career researchers would also be improved in an ideal UWA. (Research Only Staff)

I would like to see UWA as a university that supports research and creates opportunities for long-term careers for research staff and research support staff at all levels. (Research Center A3)

I'd like to work at a university where people don't break down in tears due to pressure. The way the budget shortage is dealt with is so poor. Financial pressure is used as a club to scare people; the Socratic Index is used to bludgeon people although people are working as best they can. (Arts M1)

It is important to have admin people in the right place who know what they are doing and understand the faculties. (Law B1)

We need leadership that provides a supportive environment, one that is supportive rather than competitive. (Science N2)

I would like to work in a university that has a travel policy that encourages, rather than discourages, staff to attend international conferences and network with leading scholars internationally. (Business S3)

One contributor said that he had been 'nurtured and supported' and 'felt 'loyal' to UWA because he had been treated so well throughout his career:

This is a wonderful place to be. It has allowed me to do my very best. (Research Center V3)

We might say that an ideal UWA would be a university where all academics felt this way. Like this speaker, not all contributors were unhappy with the current state of affairs at UWA. In one school several relatively new junior academics said there was much that was ideal about their current situation, in particular a Head of School who was forthright about expectations and circumstances, trusted his staff and was trusted by them in turn, encouraged a 'collegiate atmosphere', was 'accommodating' and supportive, making his staff feel 'confident' and 'secure' at the same time that he was 'research active and connected'.

An ideal UWA is a community but currently there is much that doesn't make it feel that way:

Collegiality, that's the key word. I blame the University for the toxic environment. Most researchers are obsessed with publish or perish, so people stab each other in the back. They won't collaborate for fear their own material will be plagiarized. We need a group of competent, skilled, collegiate people trying to push the boundaries forward. (Medicine L2)

University research is collaborative, we learn from and help others and expand on what we and they know. The current structure places us in competitive circumstance. It's not the right model. (Arts K1)

An ideal university would be one in which there is no friction and internal strife between teaching and research staff and research staff. (Research Centre O2)

Parking is not the issue. We need a community around the campus, all the students are around campus. We need staff accommodation around the campus to create a diverse academic community. (Science T2)

The university has been kind to early career researchers. They get special treatment. But I see my colleagues in mid-career, who are not Future Fellows, who are not being recognized for their achievements in research and collegiality. (Arts O1)

I miss a broadly vibrant intellectual community. Here people do a job and leave. In my discipline there are no evening seminars with students attending and time for questions. We need people on campus in the evening, events, central debates. (Science H2)

Opportunities to reach across disciplines were mentioned by a number of contributors:

I straddle lots of different things; my Discipline, School, cover part of me, but there is also another side of me, it's nice to be incorporated into this other Discipline, even though it has a different approach to research. It's a broader experience than just staying in my own Discipline. (Science N2)

It is ideal to be able to learn good practice from great people, to have cross-disciplinary fertilization. I'd like to have an interface with other academics. Like a grand unifying theory group, a group of academics trying to think across traditional boundaries. (Medicine SH)

Problems of this world are not addressed by a single discipline, they need to be addressed multidisciplinary. If you don't have humanities included, for example, can you pick apart any issue? (Science G3)

Time, there are so many pressures. We used to spend time talking, meeting people both within our discipline and outside. The University would be a better place if there was more interaction with others, but people just don't have the time. (Science P2)

Not all contributors emphasized an ideal UWA. These tended to be academics in what are regarded as the professions, business, engineering, medicine and law, and those who have had more experience in administration. Here the focus was on what were seen as the realities of straited circumstances and international competition:

The issue is to show our value to society. We can't believe we have inherent value and don't have to show it. We need to recognize that curiosity driven research is all well and good as long as there is a return on investment. (Engineering N1)

Idealism and realism have to find a balance, we need idealism to drive, inspire, improve but we can't just decry the way things are, we have to adjust to the corporate structure. Teaching is not just education but a viable commercial product. (Law B1)

In today's challenging and competitive environs we need to articulate why what we do is superior and we need to deliver. We need to be clear why this sort of education should be chosen. We want to be elite but not elitist. We don't want to hold on to things that aren't value adding. (Administration J1)

Those academics who do dream of an ideal UWA might argue that what they present as ideals are, perhaps, more sensible arrangements than many of those found in the current environment although the latter are likely regarded as realistic responses to real world challenges by those who implement them. One such set of ideals address the circumstances of mid-career researchers who are often on fixed term contracts and 'must secure their own funding to ensure future employment'. Yet, one contributor reports of mid-career researchers that 'most Noble Prize winners did their reward-winning work as mid-career researchers' and:

They are the ones who look after our talented high-achieving PhD students and early-career research and provide most of the day-to-day feedback and project direction advice, look after critical research infrastructure, contribute significantly to manuscript and grant writing efforts, contribute to teaching and student assessment and act as a repository of a research unit's recent history.

This contributor suggests that an Ideal UWA needs to have:

a longer term vision of how mid-career research activities provide consistency in research activities and generate clear frameworks that can actually enhance publication success, international collaboration and student learning. (Science I2)

A second research-only academic suggests that in an ideal UWA, research groups would be encouraged to identify critical research personnel and employ backup staff to ensure continuity of activity should a staff member chose, or be forced, to leave. And a group of seven research academics proposed that 'schemes that enable a high performing researcher to continue their career at UWA which otherwise may have ended due to a short term funding gap' be sustained and augmented. As another research only academic says, the lack of job security for research only staff :

does not auger well for career planning and the development of a strong research infrastructure at UWA. It also creates inefficiencies: we lose valuable knowledge when old staff leave and we waster time upskilling new staff with each new grant. (Research Center A3)

Academics from across the university decry the waste of a swollen and inefficient bureaucracy, micromanagement and its accounting culture. Yes, said one, maybe a small percentage of academic staff is not productive, at least in terms of today's accounting measures. But is it worth all the time, money and frustration of current practices to catch this small number out? And we might ask if these academics are cheating or if they are academics

in a quiescent stage, which, in the right circumstances, will manifest later in creative activity. Alternatively they might be academics who are discouraged and depressed, who need support and encouragement not the further discouragement usually provided by accounting devices. Contributors from the Arts Faculty were especially articulate on the topics of auditing and micromanagement:

A big problem is a lack of trust. Those responsible for performing duties that generate income of the university are not trusted sufficiently to enable them to do their work efficiently. It goes through the whole system. It's an absurd waste of time. The number of cheats is relatively rare. Why is there not more trust? (Arts K3)

I abhor the Socratic Index. It's a neoliberal idea to measure and quantify things that can't be. An ideal university wouldn't do that. (Arts D1)

I wish we weren't so micromanaged. Sometime I feel highly scrutinized in a way that is time wasting: PDRs, PARs, applications for this, surveys for that. Really is there any demonstration of the benefit? Does all this lead to more productive staff or more stressed staff? Has anyone demonstrated the benefit? (Arts M2)

We also need to ask, as did several contributors, if what academics do is something that really can be measured:

In order to evaluate the validity of some accounting measure you need to know if the assumptions it is based on are valid. (Research Centre E1)

I wish UWA would stop being obsessed with research rankings that completely ignore teaching and inadequately reflect the research efforts of most academic staff. (Arts K3)

During the Vietnam War the body count always gave more kills to the US soldiers but in the end, the US lost the war. (Arts C1)

Metrics is a waste of time. It's not about numbers it's about the opinion of our peers. Managers treat them like gospel but they have nothing to do with what we need to do. (Engineering T1)

Not all the things we do are measurable, especially the most important things. (Arts F2)

They dress it up like science, bean counting, but they are just guessing. (Science T2)

Two of the 'management' tools that were mentioned are the yearly review of academics in the PDR and the punctuated reviews undertaken in the PAR. There were mixed views here. Some of the more junior academics accepted them, and found them useful. More senior academics found them an unnecessary and time consuming practice.

I see the PDR process as a form of positive monitoring. It validates what I'm doing, sets targets. I think we need this along with freedom. Outside direction can put you in touch with the right people. (Science L1)

In principle PDRs are good for academic careers, but they've been corrupted. Now only SURF scores and the Socratic Index are counted. In other workplaces one person might review five people but we have a Head reviewing eighty people. (Arts F2)

The PDR should become voluntary and should not be used for appraisal. It's good for junior people, for senior people it's humiliating and unnecessary. Ideally everyone would be highly motivated and productive but PDRs don't do anything about those who are not. (Arts A2)

Perhaps most critically, UWA was seen by one contributor as 'opting out' of its leadership responsibilities by using these management tools:

An ideal university doesn't just give lip service to a learning environment. It would take a continuous reflective position on how things are working, not opt out of its responsibility with all these surveys. Take for example use of the SURF. The way it is being interpreted and used is both wrong and destructive. (Architecture N3)

Academics also have questions about the current arrangements for research funding and see the negative effects of the current regime:

Disparity of funding in a discipline group is a problem When the first ARC in-groups and out-groups emerged, well. . . the scars have never healed. It put me in an uncomfortable position. I'm a beneficiary. I see it's unfair even though I benefit. The collectivity, in it all together, suffers. (Science I2)

It would be ideal, if we had more money for staff, infrastructure, equipment, especially for Science. We won't have an equipment budget next year due to the short fall. This is not compatible with a research intensive university (Science D2)

For so long, academics have been expected to find money outside the university to support their research that this has come to be an accepted arrangement. But is it one that makes sense? Why, one might ask, employ someone to do research but not provide the means for them to do so?

An ideal university would fund research that no other funding agency would fund. (Research Center O2)

There is a role for some complete grants but there are better ways to distribute research money such as block grants so universities can then distribute the money to academics. Most applications are probably fundable. (Arts K1)

It shouldn't all be on us to do the money getting. We need time to do the research. We shouldn't just be a conduit for external funding. I think the government and the university should fund things that aren't popular. (Science T2)

Abolish the ARC, distribute the money to universities who distribute it to the faculties or schools. Every academic gets a research fund that can be accumulated. (Arts A2)

Give sufficient research money to every academic. We spend too much time getting money. It's a lottery. The University should lobby for more research funds. Most research is done by inexperienced PhD students and experienced academics spend all their time getting money. (Science F1)

There should be a body of research funds that could be allocated internally, based on trust. We would use these productively instead of wasting time on competitive grant writing. Some people might take advantage, not produce, but on balance this would be more efficient. (Arts L3).

In earlier years there was more money in the university to fund inexpensive research which is what a lot of us do. There is huge pressure to get grants but it's very hard to get them. (Science I3)

An ideal university would be genuinely interested in fostering research for the sake of research, encourage creative and innovation research instead of focusing on getting grants. That's a measurement focus. (Arts V1)

Small grants empowered junior people. They have a small amount of money for research. This persisted until recently. Not doing it now disenfranchises a lot of staff. Other universities have this and we make our junior staff look less good when it comes to competitive funding. Academics of any rank should be empowered to ask for research support at a particular time for a particular project. (Engineering F3)

And concerns were expressed with some of the means of obtaining research funds:

Linkage grants and the commercial connections they entail harms research, the ability to share data. It harms most projects, restricts what you can and can't research and what you can and can't tell people about your research. (Science J2)

UWA is putting up a sign to mining companies "We'll do your research, we don't care what you do, we'll help even if it's against the interests of people of Western Australia". It doesn't help having a Chancellor who is chair of some of these companies, there are serious conflicts of interest. And conflicts of vision. (Business B2)

An ideal UWA would provide adequate support, or different kinds of support, for postgraduate and undergraduate students:

It would be good if postgrad students were sufficiently mentored in terms of how to think strategically about getting work in the academy or other fields of work after their PhD. (Arts P1)

My ideal would be a smaller cohort of PhD student who would have a full time job at the end if they choose to continue in academia. (Science J2)

We have a PhD program of three years, but there are many things that take time. It's Ok if you know exactly what you are doing but for others it cuts down on an experimental phase, blue sky research, serendipity. (Science O3)

It is difficult to know students, who is doing the major? It is good to know students, it would help if there are difficulties. Here we are divorced from students. It would be nice to have closer connections with undergraduates. (Science L1)

We need mechanisms to recognize and bring in those students who are strongly capable and motivated from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds. (Science H2)

Only five percent of students go on to postgraduate studies, a large number go on to work in the professional field. We need support to train them to be relevant. We need the employment sector to stand up and say this isn't what we need. But they don't provide the money for us to do it. (Science G1)

And ideal university is one where the feedback comments from students on bad teaching are taken account of and acted upon. (Research Centre O2)

But academics also want to teach a certain kind of student:

Why don't students understand what we do? They think they are still high school students. (Science D2)

An ideal university would have students who are not defensive, who are open to learning new subjects and new ways. Ideally, I want students who are eager to learn, not resisting it or giving excuses all the time, who have an honest attitude. (Arts A1)

There is no way we can be a serious Uni with half the student population not knowing how to articulate their thoughts in writing. At present students are not getting any help with writing, apart from lectures about plagiarism, as if this were the most crucial issue for learning how to write. (Architecture R3)

Students are not customers or clients. It's just wrong, it comes out of a competitive business model. I don't accept that education is a commodity. What are we buying and selling? (Science G3)

With HECS fees now, our students are more economically driven, they are focused on what job they are going to be prepared for. Now it's rare for us to be challenged by students or asked questions or engaged in intellectual discussion. Our students are smart and worldly but infantilized. They don't challenge or invite a higher order of intellectual discourse or think outside the box. Our students have more ready access to academic knowledge but they lack good manners and common sense. (Medicine G2)

And they want to teach them in certain ways:

We should sell academia as providing individualized education, a diversity of ideas and interpretation. We teach different things with a different perspective from Harvard and MIT. The experience of each lecturer is unique, each academic has a unique perspective on life and on his or her subject matter to offer. Uniformity of thought controls people's lives. (Science D2)

There is an increasing demand from students to provide them with chapter and verse on what they should do. In an ideal university we would put responsibility back on students, give them more freedom too, give them permission to fail. In an ideal UWA students would be much more highly motivated, prepared to take more responsibility for their own learning. (Science I3)

We want to teach our students how to listen to others and to understand that success in life comes from genuine collaboration with others. We want a community in which everyone, student and academics alike continue to learn and this, of course, includes learning about and doing research. This will create a valuable experience for students, protect the creativity that is often undermined by current practices and shift their perspective from a focus on individual success to a collective one. (Engineering P3)

Because senior academics with a passion for teaching who are willing to devote time to it are not as appreciated as they should be, units are taught by junior inexperienced staff, so students lose out. In an ideal university, teaching would be valued and not controlled by administration. Ideally, what happens in class is more than just subject matter. (Arts A1)

Contributors also had a lot to say about the importance of teaching:

An ideal university values teaching and does not see it as the poorer cousin of research. Students are important and they deserve a good quality of education. A legitimate academic pursuit is learning how to translate research into teaching; we need to give it more credit. (Science H3)

Teaching expands to fill all available space. I feel I can always do more, if time permits. It's largely a commitment to students who want to learn. I don't want to shortchange them. It a moral question. (Arts S1)

A university is for teaching, a learning place. Where would the next generation come from without it? Teaching is the core of a university. (Education T3)

In an ideal UWA, all academics should be involved in teaching. Those in the Executive, and all others currently involved full-time in administration, should, at a minimum, coordinate one undergraduate unit a year. It would place them in a much better position to run this institution, it would expose our students to more academics whose achievements have reached the highest level, and it would do something more. It would make a public declaration, that teaching is something that matters to us all. (Arts C3)

They were also concerned about the relationship between teaching and research:

Wisdom is about balance, research informed by teaching. Both are duties and privileges. Teaching can lead to research. It's wonderful for looking at larger contexts, other areas. It expands the research perspective. If we are supposed to be about seeking wisdom, then it's balance that is crucial not high ranking on the Jiao Tong. Balance requires eliminating punitive schemes like the Art's Faculty's teaching load model that only rewards research productivity. (Arts C1)

Why was this such a good day? Teaching and research were feeding each other; it was gratifying that my students have turned into such excellent academics; I was stimulated by the new directions my colleagues are taking in their research (in one case, germinated by my Honors unit). (Arts J3)

We believe that in an ideal UWA there is a very close link between teaching and research. We would like to see research-intensive staff receive greater acknowledgement for the supervision and mentorship of Honors, Masters and PhD students as "teaching", and how this form of teaching is crucial to the University. Staff with joint teaching/research roles should have sufficient time and resources to undertake high quality research. (Research Only)

There is a big difference between people who do a lot of teaching and a lot of research. It's a huge shame that research is seen as most important. In an ideal UA there wouldn't be a big distinction, there would still be a role for doing mostly teaching or research, but one shouldn't be seen as more important than the other. Now if you do a lot of teaching, you suffer in terms of promotion and get into a vicious circle. You teach so much there is no time for research (Science I3)

People who do research also do teaching, ideally. (Administration J1)

A part of concerns about both teaching and research was an awareness of the quantity/quality tradeoff.

The more we develop deadlines, the more impact it has had on the quality of work that has been produced. So many journals to read, and we have to write a lot too, the rush, the rush. The ideal would be the reverse. Accountability is good but I would like to see us slow down, have time to invest in quality work. (Science H3).

Our program used to be tough, hard ass, we ran group projects. We kept asking students afterwards about their experience. They thought the group was the best thing. We don't have this anymore, it's been taken over by the faculty, and it's a generic system run by people who don't understand what we do. Under the new system that has been forced on us, the projects we would favor are too challenging. What happens when someone who doesn't understand, is not committed runs things? It reduces quality, there is a loss of reputation. (Science K2)

The expectation that we will teach high volumes of students takes the love out of teaching, makes it a chore. I wish we could teach small groups. Now it's like a sausage factory, and demoralizing. I wish I had fewer papers to mark but we don't want to lower the standard. Humanities' teaching is essay based; I'm not keen to graduate students who have never written an essay. (Arts M2)

Contributors also had a lot to say about the governance of the university. Here are some examples:

The biggest thing is respect for academics. Academics are seen by the administration as lazy and inefficient that need to be managed better. We are not really accessed for our ideas. A university should be managed by academics. In an ideal university policies are evidence based and debated within the academic community. (Science H2).

How can you argue against trying to be a top research university? But the way UWA goes about it is a problem. I wish the staff could engage in decision making, not though all this quantification, committees, quality assurance stuff. It's ineffective and just adds salt to the wound. An ideal university would find a way to genuinely discover a means of creating productivity and equity within a funding unit. So much time is spent on performance indicators, and energy is drained away. This is not genuine leadership. (Architecture N3).

There is a pernicious cult of managerialism, the cost of a migratory administration. The MO is to work three to five years, make unpalatable decisions and move on. There is a fundamental disinvestment in the life of staff as a body. There's probably always antagonism between administrators and academics but now it is a matter of non-recognition. They can't see each other properly. (Arts F2)

The senior management of the university should be more accountable to academics. Now it is only the other way round. When we suffer a budget deficit who is responsible? Now it looks like it is always the fault of the academics. The salaries of senior management staff should be published yearly to ensure transparency and accountability. Otherwise, they can pay themselves unrealistic salaries. Is it not ridiculous to pay a VC a million dollars while other academics are earning a fraction of that? (Law W1)

The University is becoming top-heavy, with the academic plebs groaning under the weight of the management level; the academic staff do not know their bosses and have no idea what they do – in turn, we believe management has no idea about the low state of morale or even awareness of what we do. (Arts J3)

I would like to work at a university that is run by academics not administrators with academic titles. I would like elected academic staff to dominate the forums that decide the management and future direction of the university. (Science W2)

Academics are self-driven. If administration can't help, it could at least get out of the way. We're like a market place of artisans, individual and flexible, but our corporate structure wants to turn us into a corporation like Coke. Real innovation in most cases comes from mavericks. Ideally, we would have an administration that acknowledges our maverick nature, and a flat structure, no professors, everybody at the same level, not striving for promotion (everyone is paid decently) but for peer appreciation. Let people have time to fail, think, mess around, like the structure at Google. (Science F1)

And ideal university would not have faculties and deans. It's a big waste of time and resources. The university hires people to make work for us and waste our time. Deans before were research leaders. Now they are managers, academics without the experience and knowledge to make decisions. The structure hasn't evolved. It's changed but there is resistance to a flexible structure that responds to our needs. (Engineering T1)

Structure, hierarchy, I wish the machinations of higher administration were much more open; our current VC is unapproachable. It's not transparent to lower levels of staff. So the budget, we are told leads to a 10% increase in workload but we are only getting a 2% increase in pay. Are management getting an increase in workload too? It's not clear if everybody is treated equally. Another thing is the worry about the half cohort that they have to budget for. The University should have saved the money. They've known about it for twelve years! Why is the responsibility falling on those of us at the coal face? (Arts M2)

Suggestions for Change: UWA in Transformation

You need wellbeing to be productive, if you are stressed it blocks creativity. (Science N2)

Change is intrinsic to life and not surprisingly a characteristic of those complex institutions we call universities. In the last few decades this change has been labeled by some as 'tertiary transformation', a term denoting what may be described as the 'corporatization of universities' [3]. As any first year social science student knows, a corporation is simply a social entity that endures beyond the life of any of its individual members as a 'single legal individual' [4]. However, when academics speak of the 'corporatization' of their universities, they are generally referring to recent changes in their structures, functions and purposes that are associated with the increasingly globalized corporate world of current times. These changes include the adoption of an audit culture -- an emphasis on measuring and counting 'input' and 'outcomes' in the interest of 'transparency' and 'equity' and a managerialism that increasingly constrains and interferes with academics' work. They include concerns with global competition as seen in the obsession that university central administrators appear to have with their institutions' place in a variety of ranking devices. Sadly, they appear to include a concern with the commitment, even honesty of academics, now seen more as employees who are not to be trusted, than as scholars, researchers, teachers who are dedicated to their vocation. University administrators, along, perhaps, with large segments of the general populace, see universities less as providers of a public good than as vendors of private advantage, and in association with this view have transformed students from supplicants or apprentices into customers. The time horizon of university administrations no longer stretches to a yet to be identified future, and intellectual risk taking on the part of academic staff is discouraged, if not actually punished. The 'branding' of UWA with the dictum 'achieve excellence' rather than that of 'seek wisdom', though the latter remains carved in the stones of the older part of the campus, speaks to the contemporary administrative emphasis on short term advantage. The university is 'marketed' and academics, and disciplines, are expected to compete for research money, teaching prizes and students. And change is seen as an essential good, as a means of competing successfully in an increasingly competitive world.

Clearly not all change is good, however, though it may be essential. A change may enable an individual or an institution to continue, and in that limited sense may be good, but only in anticipation of further change that enables the individual or institution to later realize deeply held values. Currently most change is being initiated and directed by governments and administrators, those external to and often with little experience of what have long been a university's crucial functions, teaching and research. On the basis of contributions from staff across UWA we propose that university change, in particular that at UWA, should, in large part, be initiated and directed by academics. Administrators have critical roles to play in this vision of an Ideal UWA, however. They should be there to implement positive and necessary changes while protecting the university from harmful global trends and ill-considered policies of local governments. In these roles they would genuinely consult with academics, not just appear to do so.

The following suggestions are derived from the conversations with UWA academics represented in this paper. Some of the suggestions reflect the views of many, others arise from the comments of one or two contributors that struck a chord with us and, that, we believe, will do the same with other academics at UWA, and perhaps elsewhere. We have elaborated on or extended some of the themes in the text that follows.

Suggestions

We need to take a close look at university governance. What kind of governance would academics find genuinely supportive? Is it appropriate for a university to be led by a group composed largely of non-academics who increasingly exclude academics from decision making? And is what has been described by one contributor as an 'outdated business model with a managerial structure from the 1960s' best for UWA? 'We need to recognize the cost of hierarchy and corporate structure', as another contributor said. We also need to look at university governance all the way down. Does it make sense to have both faculties and schools, for example? Might not the school be a more efficient and academically grounded bureaucratic layer? One contributor saw even smaller groups as both more interest centered and efficient than the school. What kind of governance would be more likely to move us in the direction of an ideal UWA as envisioned by these contributors, a university that, as a fourth contributor has said, 'genuinely seeks input from academics on important issues affecting their capacity to perform their role effectively'? Should we insist that our leaders stay among us, have our 'Heads of School in the class room so they know what the hell is going on' or insist that 'managers cycle back into teaching so they have to live with their own policies'. After all, as one contributor has noticed, in the universities ranked 27th and 54th on the Jiao Tong Index, that is, New York University and Heidelberg University, the President in the first and the Rector and Vice Rector in the second teach an undergraduate unit every year. Should this be a hierarchical arrangement, or a more democratic one, as several academics have wondered? Might we be a better university if we were 'self-managed as much as possible on a principle of subsidiarity, that is, decisions would be made largely autonomously by groups of colleagues responsible for managing the basic teaching and research obligations of the University'. And how do we provide academics with the time they would need to be actively engaged in their own governance?

We need administrators, and academics more generally, to make much greater efforts to speak directly to government. If, as one contributor believes, 'our standing as a nation on the world stage is dependent on the quality of our universities' is true, then a case that our

universities are of vital national importance is a strong one. Many of the difficulties academics face are due to the policies affecting higher education put in place by successive governments in Canberra. Of course universities need more money but we also need our leaders to persuade the central government that most of their accounting devices are a criminal waste of tax payers' money and of academics' time. Aside from the overall funding problem and bureaucratic waste, another difficulty we face is the buyer's market. For years now, we have been encouraged, if not directed, by governments to educate as many higher degree students as possible. Given the limited resources of a three year PhD and the demand for greater numbers of postgraduate students, this has undoubtedly affected the quality of our graduates in terms of their qualifications both at the time of acceptance and of completion. It has also swamped the market, making it easier for universities to hire 'casual' academics who may not have the educational background to aspire to higher standards [5]. We would be doing both our students and ourselves a service if we could gain government support for fewer, better resourced and more selective postgraduate positions.

We need to show our value to society at large and show the public what we really do. All the glitzy advertising and costly marketing exercises obscure the real university, the hard work and small but critical achievements we see day to day. 'Active advertising and branding cheapens the day to day grind of research, makes it look like magic', one contributor said. Another pointed out that celebration of 'superstar' academics seems 'divorced from what research and teaching actually achieve'. Students think we take holidays when they do; they need a more realistic idea of just what an academic is and does. So too do their parents as well as the parents of children who don't go to university and hence may think that universities have nothing to do with the quality of their lives. One contributor suggested that the university needed to be more attentive to local debates and mentioned Colin Barnett's pronouncements on climate change. Why, he asked, wasn't there any reply from university professors? Of course, here again we run into the issue of time. A central part of showing our value to society is showing respect for academics and for what academics do. This is not accomplished by advertisements celebrating achievements with only a tenuous connection to UWA. Nor is it accomplished when academics are trotted out as exotic objects to serve the public at such events as Open Day. Among other things, such expectations by administration fail to acknowledge the extent to which many academics already work beyond a reasonable work week. More critically they send a message to the public in general, and to students in particular, that academics are little more than touts. We might ask if our current accounting culture doesn't create a climate of mistrust and a view of academics as lazy miscreants. Academics themselves need to contribute to this effort. We are sometimes invited to agree with non-academic staff or outsiders that one or another of our colleagues, or a discipline group, school or faculty and what they produce, is nonproductive or useless. This may well be coming from someone operating with a short time horizon, who doesn't understand the importance of such activities as conversations between colleagues and who is primarily focused on economic outcomes. When we undermine a colleague we are undermining ourselves. The time to do some serious peer reviewing and a time to seek administrative support comes when we judge a colleague to be letting down the side.

We need to make sure that the undergraduates we accept are qualified to make good use of a course of undergraduate study and if they are not, their first year should include units that give them the skills they lack. Even if teaching staff were far better resourced than they are at present, should someone with a PhD in Philosophy or Physics be teaching basic grammar or mathematics? An ideal university, said a contributor, does not engage in the

kinds of false economies found at UWA, such as having senior academics teach numerous tutorials.

The role that the university plays in socialization needs to be acknowledged and carefully considered. ‘There is too much focus on the university as a road to employment’ said one contributor, and another decried the ‘utilitarian’ attitude of UWA students while a third said we need to provide our students with an ‘education for life after university, which is not just a body of knowledge’. Do we want our students to simply be job-ready when they graduate or should we also encourage our students to see their time at university as a first step towards global citizenship, towards becoming a person who really does examine their own life and those of others? While the new course structure appears to be a step in this direction, if students see a unit outside their major as simply something to be endured, it is a wasted effort. We need to understand more about our students, learn how to motivate them to use their university years wisely and design courses that facilitate this goal. Administrators at all levels have an important role to play here by encouraging students to respect academics and their subject matter via example, policies and practices. Among other things, academics should not be subjected to popularity contests (called SPOTs and SURF and Teaching Awards) but instead be given adequate resources, including time, usable technology and appropriate spaces, to do the best teaching possible.

Administrations need to realize that the university is not a homogenous entity. As one contributor said above, ‘we need to recognize that people make contributions in different ways’ and the same should be recognized of different disciplines, schools and faculties. While, of course, it is necessary to have some central control of university activities, effort should be made to hand as much freedom as possible to the academics who are doing the actual teaching and research. Freedom does not simply include such things as allowing academics to make decisions about what and how they teach and research but also includes freeing up resources by the removal of all but minimal reporting and accounting requirements.

Administrators need to realize that not all institutions are 20th or 21st century corporations. While being highly cognizant of what is happening in the world and very much in touch with reality, UWA needs to be a place apart from the world. It needs to be a place where thinking outside the parameters is accepted, where politically incorrect positions can be debated openly, where alternative social and technological relationships and arrangements can be imagined. It needs to be a place where the future is not six months away, where values beyond utility and efficiency can hold sway, where people, as a number of contributors have said, can take time to think about things for a while. As one contributor has already said, a university should introduce new trends, not follow them. It should be an environment where new thinking and doing is realized and becomes something in which others want to participate. It also needs to be a place where academics are not simply doing a job. ‘Ideally people choose what they do and how they do it. Academia works because of choice, about when, how and what to do. It’s a voluntary and an effective organizing structure.’

We need real action on equity. While one contributor found that the Leadership Development for Women program brought significant change to her life, other female academics thought it more of a showpiece than an effective means of addressing gender inequality. Instead, asked one, who described the LDW program as ‘fluffy and useless’, why don’t we have a program for developing gender sensitive men? Another wondered why the

University still needed the program after 20 years of its presence on campus and asked, 'Are men being given this information?' One academic mother appreciated the flexibility that academia provided but we might note that teaching workloads -- that only laughingly can be described as fitting into the 37.5 hour week of our current agreement -- disadvantage women with children, as women generally continue to be the primary child careers. Some academics would like to see greater diversity among staff and students, though, for the latter group, not with regards to qualifications for undergraduate study. In this domain, some contributors mentioned that they would like to have brighter more highly motivated students and proposed a more selective admissions scheme because, as one said, 'huge numbers of less competent students drag down the intellectual climate. Too many are here only for a degree.' The idea of equity needs to embrace more than gender and the other categories usually associated with discrimination and disadvantage: ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. It should also include academics in different fields and academics who make different contributions in the teaching research balance. Equity may be best achieved here by recognizing difference. A research intensive academic may need an expensive piece of equipment while someone in the Arts Faculty may need time away from teaching. A female academic with small children may not publish as many papers as one without children. A male academic who has recently suffered health problems may have a lower Socratic Index than his colleagues for several years.

If they see it as contrary to what a university should be, academics should actively resist acculturation to the corporate model of a university and the accompanying corporate culture.

I would like a vision of a university where knowledge is not distorted to fit into a corporate model. The production of knowledge cannot be monetized without doing violence to the notion of a university. And I would like a university where we no longer use words like 'customer', 'client', 'service provision'. (Arts D1)

We might add to this list of words to avoid, 'outcome', 'customer service', 'CEO', 'KPI', 'transparency', 'accountability', 'branding' and many others. An initial step in such resistance is to refuse corporate-speak. If we call an academic a 'manager' rather than a Chair or a Head, we may be more likely to accept it when he or she acts more like a business manager than an academic leader. A 'chair', for example, probably evokes an image of the chairs that we sit in at staff meetings, while 'head' may evoke sitting at the head of a conference table or the location of our brain. The idea of a 'manager', in contrast, may be associated with a white shirt, tie, an in-and-out tray, someone who operates 'by the book'. When we use corporate-speak, we also cast ourselves and our colleagues as commodities rather than as people; we become 'human resources' rather than thinking beings, sentient academics. Language, of course, does not determine thought, but it can direct and obscure parts of our focus, at least for a while. In addition it can lull us into accepting arrangements and relations that, perhaps, we should not. Some words from the corporate world, like 'micromanagement', are so useful we might well want to adopt them. Having been appropriated by the corporate world from the common lexicon in the first place, some are hard to replace, e.g. 'cost' and 'benefit', 'production', 'career'. However, they have become symbols with increasingly corporate meanings. When we use them we should be conscious of this and actively recall the meanings and connotations they first had for us. In addition to paying attention to language, we should try to resist practices that come directly from the world of business and are of questionable value for an academia we desire to see. Such practices might include most surveys, accounting measures, KPIs, PARs and PDRs and the control of unit structure and content by various external bodies. Here we need to give

considerable thought to practices that will provide genuine guidance and support responsibility.

The quantity/quality tradeoff is a critical issue that the University as a whole needs to address. It is generally known, that in circumstances of limited resources, and resources rarely are not limited, quality diminishes when quantity increases. Various levels of administration, however, do not seem to share in this knowledge, as they impose directive after directive that increase class sizes, teaching workloads and demands for more publications and grant income at the same time they insist that ‘excellence’ must be achieved. Academics are punished if they are not seen to be successful at this impossible task of simultaneously increasing quantity and maintaining quality, via the Socratic Index, for example, with even higher teaching loads or in the case of research only staff, with dismissal. Such practices are viewed as unfair, lead to low morale and undoubtedly affect our ability to do the kind of work of which we can be proud.

We need to provide academics with more time, to think, to mentor others, to have conversations across disciplines and outside the university, to contribute to a far greater extent to the governance of this university. Just how time and money are spent needs to be seriously considered, for a redirection of this simple, but essential, resource of time back to academics would allow us to address so much of what contributors have identified as sources of a less than ideal UWA. A review of the university budget might be one way of approaching this, though reviews themselves often seem to be just another money and time wasting exercise. One contributor has said, ‘ideally academia is a form of social production, it works because of choice, it is voluntary, we decide when, what and how to do our work’. If we agree with the idea that universities function because of what academics do, we might simply give academics greater autonomy, allowing them to operate as they see fit with regard to teaching and research.

We need to ask just how well administrative policies and practices match up with University values. We also need to query the values themselves. Are they the kinds of values we would associate with an ideal UWA? The ‘values’ in the Vice Chancellor’s Strategic Directions paper for 2009-13, presented as underpinning University policy and practice, are presented as ‘a commitment to:

- a high performance culture designed to achieve international excellence;
- academic freedom to encourage staff and students to engage in the open exchange of ideas and thoughts;
- continuous improvement through self-examination and external review;
- fostering the values of openness, honesty, tolerance, fairness, trust and responsibility in social, moral and academic matters;
- transparency in decision making and accountability;
- equity and merit as the fundamental principles for the achievement of the full potential of all staff and students’ [6].

If we understand values to be statements of what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, then we understand that the Administration sees good in and thinks it is right to encourage:

- achieving international excellence
- academic freedom

continuous improvement of the individual and the institution
openness, honesty, tolerance, fairness, trust and responsibility
transparency
achievement of the full potential of all staff and students

Does past and current practice of the University Administration serve to support and foster these values? Here is a small but notable example. On our last Open Day, one contributor observed the thousands of glossy colour printed pamphlets handed out to people who, she remarked, just come in off the streets. At the same time, academics, at least in her faculty, are not allowed to print out class notes for budgetary reasons. Does this represent the University's idea of 'equity and merit as the fundamental principles for the achievement of the full potential of all staff and students'? We might also ask if use of the Socratic Index for promotion, sabbatical and assigning teaching workloads really enhances academic freedom; if accounting and surveillance practices really lead to continuous improvement of the individual and the institution; if 'openness, honesty, tolerance, fairness, trust and responsibility' are encouraged by micromanagement. Is transparency apparent when representatives of the academic community are excluded from Senate discussions? Understanding 'international excellence' to mean a high ranking on indexes like the Jiao Tong, we could suggest that the University administration follow the proposal of one contributor who said UWA should hire two more Nobel Prize winners to consolidate its position in the top 100 universities. Being regarded as a top university has value not only for administrators who might see it enhancing their institution's reputation and/or as a means of attracting more overseas students. It can also be of some value to academics. Research money and publications may come more easily when the authors of grants and papers are identified with a relatively prestigious institution [6]. However, shouldn't we all keep in mind that instruments like the Jiao Tong are very rough measures, especially of something as complex and significant for human wellbeing as a university? It doesn't measure, for example, the quality of teaching at universities, perhaps the reason why teaching at UWA has been so underfunded in recent years. Yet, if upon arrival our international students find that UWA is far from an ideal place to actually study, what will our ranking be worth? One contributor suggested that other considerations of university quality might be of equal value, such as the ethical and social practices of an institution. Another pointed out how striving of this kind has created an environment of 'threat' on campus and asked how many staff were on medications or taking stress leave. A third wondered how much it cost UWA to get into the top 100 and if there might have been other ways of doing so, referring to the destructive competition, inequalities and damage to teaching and collegiality that the effort had generated. We suggest that the values of the university are ideas that need to arise from ongoing discussions among academics and that it is the values that emerge from these discussions that need support. And we suggest that serious attempts be made to ensure that 'support' really does support. That it is not simply 'lip service' to an ideal.

A university should set standards in the community, not just of intellectual fertility, but also of environmental sustainability, of equitable workplace relations, of equal opportunity, of cultural performances and creativity. Its staff are its greatest resource and should be treated with care and dignity. (Arts J3)

Footnotes

1. A mass email was sent out first to all UWASSA members and later to the university wide email list. (See invitation to participate below.) Seventy two academics and

administrators were approached directly by the project coordinator either in person or by email; thirty one of these contributed to the project. These were either individuals known, or know of, by the coordinator or suggested by other contributors. Two Heads of School and one Discipline Chair also circulated the project announcement to their groups. As the contributors to this project were essentially self-selected, a fair question to ask is just how representative their views are of the 1,534 academic staff associated with UWA in 2013. We can only leave this to individual readers to answer. A related question is why didn't other staff contribute to the project? Informal conversations with several academics suggested the following possibilities: time pressure, a concern to only engage in activities that lead to points on the Socratic Index or help meet workload targets, a disinclination to see such participation as part of the academic role, a sense of 'what's the point, it won't make any difference' and satisfaction with the way things are.

From: UWA ASA
Sent: Thursday, July 11, 2013 3:48 PM
To: UWA ASA
Subject: An Ideal UWA
Importance: High



Dear Academic Staff Member,

What kind of a university would you like to work in? What do you think a university should do and be? UWAASA wants to explore these questions with as many academics and researchers at UWA as possible. These will be collated in a UWAASA publication/booklet that may be used as a form of critique of current and future University policy and as a record of academic experience and ideas about universities, what is, or was, that is valued, and what might be.

Professor Victoria Burbank is coordinator of this project. If you would like to contribute, please send your ideas via email to her at victoria.burbank@uwa.edu.au. If you would like to discuss the project or your ideas about an ideal UWA, please phone her on x2852. If you know of UWA academics/researchers that you think would like to contribute, please forward this email to them. They do not need to be a member of UWAASA. All communications will remain confidential. Texts from discussions and emails may be quoted in the publication but their sources will remain anonymous.

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2. For an extended discussion of this topic see, Stefan Collini 2012 *What are Universities For?*, London: Penguin.
3. The follow lists just a few of the papers and books on this topic:

Connell, Raewyn 2012 My University: Neoliberalism and knowledge. *NTEU Advocate* 19 (3):26-7

Kipnis, Andrew 2008. Audit cultures: Neoliberal governmentality, socialist legacy, or technologies of governing. *American Ethnologist* 35(2):275-289;

Myers, Donald, 2012 *Australian Universities: A Portrait of Decline*. AUPOD
www.australianuniversities.id.au

Parker, Lee 2011 University corporatisation: Driving redefinition. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*: 22(4):434-450;

Shore, Chris and Susan Wright, 2000 Coercive accountability: The rise of audit culture in higher education. In *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*, ed. M. Strathern, pp 57-89. New York; Routledge;

Shore, Chris 2008 Audit Culture and Illiberal governance: Universities and the politics of accountability. *Anthropological Theory* 8(3):278-298.

Tuchman, Gaye, 2009 *Wannabu U: Inside the Corporate University*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

4. Keesing, Roger 1975 *Kin Groups and Social Structure*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, page 17.
5. For further discussion of this topic see Noam Chomsky On Academic Labor, Weekend Edition, Feb. 28-Mar 02, 2014 How Higher Education Ought to Be.
6. Strategic Directions 2009-2013 UWA website.
7. Da Silva, Raymond 2012 *Enhancing UWA's Research Reputation: A Discussion Paper Based on the Academic Literature*. UWAASA.