

# Maintaining a human focus while achieving our industrial objectives

## 4. FROM THE VC'S DESK: "PROVING OUR QUALITY"

"Never mind the quality, feel the width," wrote Vince Powell and Harry Driver, thereby providing the name for a popular British TV series in the late 1960s. We do pretty well on width. We are the most distributed university in Australia, and continue to be the most rapidly growing. Our total student load is now well above 11,000 equivalent full-time students (EFTSU), making us significantly larger than a number of older universities, including the ANU, Flinders, Wollongong, Swinburne, and Murdoch. On current figures (unconfirmed) we will this year overtake Monash and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in the proportion of our students who are international full fee-paying, placing us third in Australia in proportional (not absolute) terms behind Curtin University and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). This is thanks to the mighty and continuing efforts of all those at CQU and CMS involved in marketing, recruiting, teaching, administering, and supporting our international students.

So we do fine on width. But what about quality? And what is quality? George Bernard Shaw had no doubts at all - on this as on most other matters. "There are only two qualities in the world: efficiency and inefficiency; and only two sorts of people: the efficient and the inefficient," he wrote in *John Bull's Other Island*. And on this, as on most matters Shaw was also wrong. Quality is not the same as efficiency, although efficiency is one important element in the provision of a quality service, or in a production process of quality.

When it comes to higher education, the most popular view is that quality is fitness for purpose. The primary test of quality is whether the product or process in question actually provides what it is supposed to provide, and provides it at an appropriate standard.

For example, we maintain that a given CQU degree is the same degree, awarded at the same standard, irrespective of the campus at which it was undertaken, or the mode of delivery (on campus or distance). From the beginning of next year, it will be possible to undertake some CQU degrees at a total of 12 different sites (nine in Australia and three overseas) as well as entirely by distance education. Each of these 13 different routes can lead to the very same degree, which we claim is of an identical standard, however obtained. How do we know this, and how do we prove it?

Those who deliver that degree would certainly vouch for it. But how objectively convincing is that to someone who is looking at the University from the outside? Indeed, without in any way disparaging those who do vouch for it, how can the rest of us within our University really be sure? And, as for those who do vouch for it, how do they know? And how do they prove it?

This is a perfect example of just one of the questions we are sure to be asked in a quality audit, of the sort to which we will be subject from the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). But we cannot wait until the quality auditors knock on our doors, as they inevitably will, at our expense, at least once between 2001 and 2005 inclusive. We must all be aware that there are some outside our University who regard our claim to identical standards for a given degree through 13 distinct routes of access with incredulity. It behoves us now to have in place, for all to see, the rigorously documented systematic processes, together with their documented outcomes, that prove the standards are the same. If we cannot, our claim will be regarded with scepticism. Is this really so unreasonable?

Success breeds envy. And, as John Stuart Mill among others has pointed out, envy is one of the most destructive of all sins. Why? Because the envious person gets satisfaction from cutting down the object of envy (the tall poppy syndrome) even if nobody else benefits as a result. There is no doubt our expansive and distributive success - our width - has made us an object of envy for some within Australia's higher education sector. "They must be sacrificing quality in the process," runs the tittle-tattle. Like all tittle-tattle, this is damaging, insofar as it influences attitudes towards us by those who have no way of countering it.

In fact we do have strong protocols for ensuring constancy of standards across campuses and modes of delivery, although their articulation is at different stages of development in different faculties. Making such protocols fully comprehensive and ensuring rigour in application, as well as clear documentation of processes and outcomes, must be a key element of our quality assurance (QA) process. I stress that this is not just to meet the expectations of the quality auditors. This is essential if we are to truly know that we meet our own expectations, so that our current and future students know why they are justified in believing the claims we make, and uninformed envy driven tittle-tattle may be quickly and terminally rebutted.

What I have outlined above is just one example of why we must attach unprecedented importance to QA, its systematic documentation, and rigorous application. Our aim must be to reverse Powell and Driver: "Never mind CQU's width; just feel our quality."

- *Professor Lauchlan Chipman, Vice-Chancellor and President. [11/10/00 UniNews Weekly No. 333]*