

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) 2011 Conference Report

The 2011 conference was a great success with 90 participants from 37 universities across Australia and New Zealand. As well as Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (ASSH) faculties, Associate Deans Teaching and Learning and, for the first time, Associate Deans Research attended the conference. The program included general sessions and sessions particularly set up for Associate Deans. Day one of the conference was a half-day involving the launch of the Associate Deans Research network, project working group meetings and the DASSH Board meeting.

Day two commenced the formal program of the conference. Following the acknowledgement of country by Professor Stanley Nangala who gave us some of the history of beautiful Magnetic Island, and the welcome to participants by Professor Jennifer Radbourne, President of DASSH, Dr Glenn Withers, CEO of Universities Australia, set the conference context with his keynote address “Why Big Bang Theory is Trivial”. Dr Withers reminded participants that, in our disciplines, we are dealing with issues where values and intuition may override logic and rationality, and that knowledge which influences decision-making and policy, is made up of both information and values, of intuition and rationalisation and analysis. Our task is always ‘pushing uphill’ as we attempt to infuse rationality and logic into policy-making. It is easier in the sciences, but while 23% of students are in the STEM disciplines, 54% are in HASS disciplines. We teach the majority of students but our share of research income is \$482 million compared to \$8923 million in STEM. Our responsibility is to find the means to blend intuition and evidence. We can do this through a focus on the teaching/research nexus. There is evidence that shows improvement in achievement and completions of students where the research environment is strong, and where the university has greater autonomy and less reliance on government funding. Base Funding must increase, but our challenges are both external and internal: the rise of China and India and rethinking international education, for-profit educational institutions as partners or competitors, a command and control regime in universities increasing effort on the ‘management of research’, and the need to present an holistic engagement with the world’s moral challenges. Within the ASSH sector we must improve the status and value of what we do; collaborate with the sciences, widening their definition; improve the peer review process in ERA; address teaching loads and research outputs; and link arts and sciences Schools and faculties. All of these points were repeated in later presentations.

The ALTC Project report on Employability of BA Graduates revealed that students value critical thinking as the key graduate attribute, but that employers and the community remain to be convinced of the BA graduates’ employability skills. The research to date from the second ALTC project report on Academic Leadership for

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Succession, showed most survey respondents (42.9%) were aged between 56 and 65, had been in their role from one to three years, and that 88% had no succession plan. The outcome of this project will be a Strategic Plan for Succession in the ASSH sector.

Professor Graeme Hugo gave the second keynote address on the challenge of our ageing demography in Australian universities. He pointed to population increases in developing countries through migration, and the 'global war' for talent as labour markets (including the academic workforce) compete internationally. In Australia the older age group (Baby Boomers) is growing faster than other age groups and make up 56% of the academic workforce. The university sector is growing slightly but there are more older academics in the ASSH sector than in other disciplines. The sciences have the youngest workforce. The three issues facing the academic sector are ageing, low job satisfaction and emigration. Academics report lack of job security, poor pay and increased administrative load. This, together with increasing casualisation, presents a real recruitment challenge. In policy terms universities face increasing student numbers, lack of jobs, attrition, loss of Generation X due to casualisation and the longevity of the ageing academics, and the risk of not attracting emigrants back to Australia. These issues were summed up by Professor Hugo as "Recruitment, Retention and Return."

The Deans' Academic Salons provided in-depth sharing of experiences, successes and challenges around workload models, performance management and staff profiling and planning. Most universities adopt a 40:40:20 average proportion of time for teaching, research and service, although there is diversity in what and how service is described and counted. The best models are simple, transparent and flexible at the local level. It was proposed that several examples will be placed on the DASSH website (without the university name). The second and third discussions revealed cultural and attitudinal issues along with lack of support from the HR department on easing out non-performing or ageing staff, and the inability to recognise industry experience prior to or midway in the academic career.

Day 3 of the conference focussed on research. The first session included Professor Charles Royal from the University of Auckland and Professor Graeme Turner from the University of Queensland. Professor Royal described Indigenous transformation through research excellence. By building grand themes around creative potential, the quest for social justice and the desire for cultural revitalisation, it is possible to create distinctive and quality research. He showed how this had been achieved in New Zealand.

Professor Turner presented a dynamic assessment of the crisis faced in humanities research in Australia. He cited the long tail of HASS units of evaluation, selective use of ERA results by the media and some universities, the disappointing outcomes from peer review, the inability to define 'world standard' research, and the problem of

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claiming lack of funding but impressive achievements. Systemically universities are shrinking the humanities disciplines, particularly outside the GO8 and metropolitan universities. This leads to regional universities with no research funding, no senior staff, no mentoring, and a poor research culture. Some of the reasons for this are the nature of interdisciplinarity in HASS, the effect of the 'new humanities', reduced infrastructure, linking research to innovation at the policy level, and the split of higher education across government departments. The humanities are now so depleted and disconnected, they are not able to argue their value in the university, the community or business. Professor Turner proposed that, at each individual university, we must revive senior staff acceptance of their research administration and leadership responsibilities, break the current patterns of appointment, build ECR career planning, develop nodes of local collaboration and protect endangered disciplines, and believe that high quality work will be valued over time. His argument is to seek business tax support for HASS funding and to seek inclusion of a new national priority in ARC grants "Understanding cultures and communities".

Professor Turner was followed by Professor Mark Balnaves, whose advised humanities researchers to develop customised tools for our discipline and configure virtual laboratories that compete with science models of data collection and analysis. We have to create "things" that have impact, to overcome the assumptions that researchers in the humanities are techno phobic, solo researchers, not using data or requiring infrastructure. In fact, our open access model of ideas and critical thinking, threatens scientific integrity, and has to be configured as a critical research laboratory.

The Associate Deans then presented impressive reports on their progress: Teaching and Learning over 18 months, and Research over one day. The Associate Deans T&L have conducted successful projects on the Transition Experience, Assessment Policy and Low SES students. The report demonstrated the maturity of this network. Their national meetings, benchmarking, peer learning and peer support, have delivered professional development, leadership and profile for all those in the network. The Associate Deans Research agreed to form a network and work on seven proposed projects.

The final conference sessions involved key presenters on topics that will guide our future work – the ARC, TEQSA and the experience of our New Zealand colleagues who are just emerging from a demand driven system of student enrolments. Ms Leanne Harvey, Executive General Manager of the ARC, summarised changes to the 2012 ERA collection following the review of the 2010 ERA assessment. DASSH had made submissions to this review and we are pleased with the outcomes. Ms Harvey asked participants how do they wish to be further involved, and she answered some probing questions. Dr Jeanette Baird gave participants an up to date report on the role and purpose of TEQSA. She described TEQSA' requirement to integrate Higher Education and VET, as balancing market driven policy and non market driven policy

while managing the risk, proportion and necessity of regulation. Importantly Dr Baird said she had been impressed with the conference discussion and her understanding of the ASSH sector and our rigorous approach to teaching and learning will help her in future TEQSA deliberations. Professor Deborah Willis from the Victoria University of Wellington, shared her country's journey in research assessment, base funding, dual-sector delivery and student demand. Her analysis provided a sound warning for our larger, changing policy environment.

The overarching message of this conference was affirmation of what we know of ASSH teaching models, the status of our research, our ageing workforce and our profile in our universities and the community. We must now move beyond this need for collective affirmation, to action and new ways to redefine the value of our disciplines.

During the conference DASSH held its AGM. The new Board comprises: Professor Krishna Sen (President), Professor John Germov (Vice President), Professor Toni Makkai (Secretary), Professor John Simons (Treasurer), Professor Susan Dodds, Professor Deborah Willis, Professor Pal Ahluwalia and Professor Majella Franzmann (General Board Members).

The 2012 conference will be held on 13-14 September in Canberra, hosted by The Australian National University and supported by the University of Canberra. Professor Toni Makkai made a strong claim for attendance. The continuing growth and professionalism of DASSH with its Canberra headquarters at Universities Australia will ensure that this conference is in the right place at the right time.

Written by:

Professor Jennifer Radbourne

Past President

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