The State of Flinders University—A Perspective by the New Vice-Chancellor
April 2008

1. Introduction and Purpose

I commenced as Vice-Chancellor of Flinders University on January 2. In my initial email to staff I expressed the view that I was inheriting a well-run university with an excellent record and a strong financial position. I felt that there was no immediate crisis that needed my attention. Thus I could afford to spend the first few months of my vice-chancellorship getting to know Flinders, allowing Flinders to get to know me and learning as much as I could of the aspirations and plans of stakeholders, particularly the South Australian Government. On the national scene, a period of reflection was also useful, even necessary, since the new Commonwealth Government’s plans and policies for higher education are yet to be fully revealed.

The purpose of this paper is to:

• summarise what I have learnt about Flinders in my first three months;
• briefly comment on recent announcements by the new Rudd Labor Government;
• assess how I think the University is travelling in the light of the above; and
• articulate a few key themes or messages that I propose to emphasise over the next year or so as we establish the foundations of the next strategic plan.

In sum, the intent is to catalyse debate on how we should move forward (even on where we might move to) in the longer term and to generate commitment to action on a few selected but important intermediate initiatives. (At the same time, we will continue to work on implementing the Operational Plan for 2008 which was noted by Council at its last meeting.)

2. What I have learnt in my first three months

To guide my initial conversation with the Flinders’ community and more widely, in January I posed four questions:

• What do people like about Flinders?
• What don’t they like about Flinders?
• What do they think should be fixed?
• What would they do if they were me?

In response I received over 60 emails. Comments also came in various telephone conversations and in my more formal visits and meetings, including an ideas forum I hosted in February for approximately 40 staff to explore some key human resources issues facing the University. I also attended a meeting of the Student Council at which a wide range of topics relevant to students were canvassed. I would like to express my appreciation of the warm welcomes that I have received and the generous spirit in which people responded to my questions. While I have not been able to respond to all emails and letters, they have been read and all ideas will continue to be considered seriously.

1 With acknowledgement to Rod Eddington who asked similar questions as he began his tenure as CEO of British Airways.
Finally, I have consulted externally and taken every opportunity to meet key stakeholders: the Premier, Ministers, senior bureaucrats, community and business leaders, local Councils and our alumni.

So what did I hear?

There is a clear affection for the University and what it stands for. In particular, there is a continuing attachment to the initial aspirations of the University: to increase access to higher education and to break down academic disciplinary barriers. Staff also commented on the supportive working environment, good working conditions and sense of community at Flinders, as well as the collegiality and autonomy given to academic staff. A number of staff commented on the physical beauty of the campus.

The comments from staff also reflect, however, a desire for change in both how the University is projected externally, but also in how it is managed internally. Whilst it is not possible to represent here all the views I received, the following issues were raised by a number of staff:

- the need for the University to position itself more clearly within the State and the higher education sector generally, opening up the question of whether we should strive for excellence across the board or sharpen further our focus;
- the need for better marketing of the University: there is a feeling that we are not competitive in this area;
- the need for improved flexibility in the management of our staffing resources: more flexibility in recruitment, better performance management, and better succession planning;
- concerns about workload and a willingness to support initiatives (eg changes to the current academic staff profiles) to allow staff to concentrate more intensively on either teaching or research;
- the need to be clearer about our real research strengths and to direct resources accordingly;
- a desire for more consultation and communication about strategic directions, but also a recognition of the need for strong executive leadership, decision-making and accountability;
- the desirability of having a city presence for the University and of recognising more explicitly that we are a multi-site institution with a wide geographical footprint; and
- a desire to achieve greater administrative efficiencies, to remove duplication where it occurs and to see greater consistency of administrative practice across the University.

As the new Vice-Chancellor, I found these comments from staff very heartening. They indicate that staff are committed to the University but are willing to countenance the need for change to position us better for the future. External feedback was also revealing and very consistent with the findings of last year’s branding survey. We are respected but lack a sharp distinctive position. When asked what I should fix, the answer (particularly from those with knowledge of the higher education system) was to rebuild and sharpen Flinders’ reputation and recognition in research.

3. Commonwealth Government Policy

I wish to comment briefly on the current situation with regard to Commonwealth Government policy, as our response to future challenges will continue to be significantly influenced by Commonwealth funding arrangements and national priorities.
While big strategic decisions by the Commonwealth are off the agenda until next year, we know already that:

- the Government’s engagement with and funding of universities will be governed by individually negotiated, mission-based ‘compacts’, designed to reflect the needs, priorities and strengths of individual institutions;

- the implementation of compacts will be influenced very significantly by the outcomes of the Innovation Review, chaired by Dr Terry Cutler, and the Higher Education Review, chaired by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley. It is also clear that the outcomes of these reviews will be a very significant factor in any possible increase in funding, which unfortunately is unlikely before 2010;

- the Government is committed to developing and trialling the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative which is intended to replace the Research Quality Framework of the previous Government. Responsibility for ERA has been handed primarily to the Australian Research Council. In my view, this does not mean that ‘basic research’ will automatically be deemed ‘higher quality’ than more applied research. Rather it means that recognition by peers, usually through publication and citation, will be critical. Certainly it will be harder to argue in a compact discussion for ‘research intensiveness’ if a significant fraction of academic staff are not active publishers in high-quality outlets and visible in their respective research communities; and

- social inclusion and participation are back on the Commonwealth’s agenda in a way that we have not seen since the late 1980s.

I have been mindful of these developments in framing what follows.


Flinders has much of which to be proud. However, any organisation which fails to respond creatively to change is, potentially, vulnerable. For us, there are some particular challenges:

- we are the smallest university in South Australia and at risk of being marginalised between the established, high quality, comprehensive, research intensive ‘sandstone’ brand of the University of Adelaide and the rapidly emerging University of South Australia which is the biggest university in the State in terms of total number of students;

- although our overall research performance has improved over recent years, our relative standing on key indicators is declining. The decline in ARC and NHMRC success is of particular concern because this form of peer assessment remains the ‘gold coin’ of university research excellence. More generally, our research performance is at risk from the departure of critical leaders and emerging talent either through retirement or active recruitment by other institutions. We need to arrest this decline if we are to aspire to be the host of one or more ‘hubs’ in Minister Carr’s proposed ‘hubs and spokes’ model of university-based research;

- whilst we have an enviable record of external recognition of teaching excellence and innovation, e.g. through Carrick awards, our applications for these awards may decline this year, suggesting that we are confronting a problem in identifying, supporting and developing the next generation of potential nominees;
it is becoming increasingly difficult, in the face of competitive pressure and demographic challenges, to attract the number of students that we need to meet our Commonwealth-endorsed targets across our current range of courses. Attracting higher-ranking TER students is a special challenge. We may be experiencing in some courses a downward demand spiral whereby a lower minimum TER, instituted to meet intake targets despite reduced demand, can lower the perceived prestige of the affected course and reduce demand even further;

this year we have had the first decline in onshore international student commencing enrolments in six years. While there is a small increase in overall onshore international enrolments, we need to step up our activities if our international income growth is to be sustainable. Competition for international students remains fierce, whilst local capacity building in many traditional markets combined with the high value of the Australian dollar must begin to have an effect;

there is a perception that we are disconnected geographically and intellectually from the ‘new South Australia’ driven by the resource and defence sectors, and from the City of Adelaide because we have no city presence; and

the likely shift to the City of the centre-of-gravity of the public health system (typified by the development of ‘The Marj’ and the desire of the State to build a new medical research institute to rival high profile interstate institutes) poses a threat to our reputation as a leader in medical research and education.

None of these challenges and associated risks point to an immediate crisis. However if we fail to respond creatively and on our terms to these challenges, I worry that the University that I hand on to my successor will not be as well positioned as the one I inherited.

5. Responses—Rising to the Challenges

While the external environment is unlikely to become clear for many months, I believe it is possible, indeed vital, for us to begin to address the challenges facing us. The key will be to do this flexibly and in a way that delivers intermediate outcomes that are likely to be valuable whatever the ultimate Commonwealth policy framework.

So what might we do? In essence, I would like us to be bold and, in the spirit of the inaugural vice-chancellor, Peter Karmel, ‘experiment and experiment boldly’ to:

- reemphasise Flinders’ founding ethos of inclusivity by reaching out to people and communities who do not normally aspire to a university education and by being willing to deliver education in potentially new ways;

- rebuild Flinders’ research reputation without diminishing our commitment to high quality teaching; and

- position Flinders as a distinctive, valued and recognised contributor to South Australian higher education, the Australian university system and the global university community.

More specifically, in the run up to the formal development of a new strategic plan for 2010-2014 in 2009, I propose to emphasise the following five key themes or messages:
Positioning Flinders
Making people a strategic priority
Sharpening our research profile
Increasing our attractiveness to students
Maximising the use of available resources

Let me amplify each a little.

5.1 Positioning Flinders

A common refrain through the feedback that I have received is a desire for Flinders to have a sharper profile and to be more distinctive in South Australia, nationally and internationally.

Of course, to effectively position any institution requires clarity of vision and purpose. And for us, I believe, that is still a work in progress, worthy of, and needing, further discussion, analysis and debate. *Inspiring Achievement* is a good start on a tagline but I’d like to see more, perhaps along the lines of *crossing boundaries*. The idea that we encourage people to cross boundaries - whether disciplinary, geographical, racial, ethnic or social - and to be comfortable in doing so seems to me to resonate well with our founding philosophies and ethos. It is also vital to the future of Australia and the globe, since none of the major challenges we face are the preserve of any one profession or discipline.

Whatever the final outcome of this important debate over the vision and purpose of Flinders there are some important positioning steps that we can take now and which would enhance our external recognition more effectively with Government, the community and, very importantly, potential students. Thus I propose that, over the next 12 months, we aim to:

- *connect more strongly with the ‘new South Australia’*. Flinders is well placed to make a contribution to the State Government’s policy agenda, not just to the resources and defence sectors, where we have more capability and involvement than is often realised, but in other areas as well, such as public sector reform. Most importantly, we have a special role to assist the southern suburbs of Adelaide benefit from this transformation of the State’s economy. We need to promote our capabilities more and actively target engagement with Government, as we did following the closure of Mitsubishi and over our decision to relaunch engineering, to ensure that we are well-positioned to both contribute to and benefit from the strategic direction of the State. I intend to make this an ongoing priority for myself and the senior executive of the University;

- *strengthen our green credentials*. An assessment of the environmental footprint of the University is underway. This is an important initiative and I have asked for it to be accelerated. We will develop a strategy to reduce our overall impact on the environment, including our carbon emissions. I also think we need to take the green theme further by making the environment and sustainability a much stronger theme in our degrees, our research agenda, and in our community engagement. We have had a number of projects on environmental aspects of mining and have the disciplines to do more. We might also position ourselves to assist local industry and Government deal with the massive training and policy development required to implement carbon emissions trading;
• establish a city presence. I think it is time for a higher profile in the City for a number of reasons including access to Government and business and to enhance our profile with the Adelaide City Council. Most importantly, it would enable us to offer certain courses in a more convenient location for working students. I am currently talking with the State Government and the Adelaide City Council about a possible location for a Flinders’ city presence;

• transform alumni, public relations and development functions. I have recently received the report of the examination of the Public Affairs, Alumni and Development Offices, which was commissioned by Anne Edwards at the end of last year. This report recommends some major changes to these functions. I am considering its implementation as a matter of urgency. A particular priority will be the development of a coherent and integrated strategic marketing and communications plan for Flinders that should lead to:

  ➢ a more consistent and sharper institutional image;
  ➢ increased coordination between University-wide and Faculty marketing and communication and thus a more efficient use of resources;
  ➢ a greater public awareness of our accomplishments, values, and needs;
  ➢ more satisfied and engaged alumni; and, ultimately,
  ➢ increased financial support from both public and private sources.

5.2 Making people a strategic priority

People are the core of every organisation but particularly a university. Without creative, committed and high performing staff (and, it must be said, students) no university can excel and maintain its place in global higher education. It is clear from my discussions to date that many staff feel that Flinders is a great place to work, have a great commitment to Flinders and are prepared to ‘go the extra mile’ to deliver. Students also feel respected and consider that Flinders is a great place to study. This is a fantastic foundation on which to build.

However, there are a number of issues that warrant serious attention, including:

• workloads and workload planning and policies;
• recruitment strategies, staff development, retention and succession planning;
• flexibility for academic staff to focus more differentially, where appropriate, on teaching or research; and
• performance management and performance-based rewards, including performance pay or bonuses and non-monetary rewards.

These can be addressed incrementally or we can be bold and ask whether the current nature and scope of both academic and general staff positions serves either the University or the individuals involved well.

Currently, academic staff are expected to both teach and research, as well as undertake professional performance (including service to the community) and administrative duties. In reality, not all staff maintain an active and productive research profile. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this. Some staff prefer to focus on excellence and innovation in their teaching. In professionally-oriented disciplines, there is an overwhelming necessity to provide a professionally-connected education. In areas where cutting-edge research is expensive, some staff may face difficulties in securing adequate research funding. Other staff may simply struggle to produce the kind of sustained high-quality research output that we expect in an internationally benchmarked university.
Compacts are likely to lead to a university being funded more explicitly, transparently and (importantly) accountably for its activities in research, teaching and community service/engagement.

I think it is time, therefore, as I have been urged by many Flinders staff, to challenge the view that all academics should be expected to contribute all of the time across all areas of academic activity. In particular, I believe it is time to introduce more flexibility into the definition of academic positions to allow staff, subject to some obvious constraints in terms of ensuring our ability to meet our overall teaching and research profile and obligations, to follow a career path based on excellence in teaching or excellence in research or a combination of both. For this to be done fairly and equitably, appropriate adjustments will need to be made to the University’s policies on workload, staff development, study leave, rewards, promotion and performance management. I propose to set up a working party to explore the relevant issues in more detail and to define the rights and responsibilities of a spectrum of positions, from ‘research-intensive’ to ‘teaching-intensive’. In the latter, occupants would be expected to maintain their own professional and disciplinary competency but not necessarily advance their discipline through original research. An important issue for this working party will be to ensure that all positions, whatever their balance between teaching and research, are subject to high expectations of performance around professional excellence, innovation, productivity and external recognition.

With regard to general staff, I suspect it is too far a stretch to consider abolishing the distinction between academic and general staff. However I certainly believe that it is time to blur the distinction and allow posts that have dual character eg general staff who may contribute to teaching programs and/or apply for research grants. I have asked Human Resources to review policies and employment conditions to identify any impediments to this.

More generally, I intend to take every opportunity to achieve increased flexibility in the University’s employment structures and policies. We must do this for two reasons: first, as a response to staff concerns about workload, impediments to career advancement and inadequate management of performance; and second, to ensure that the University is positioned to respond to future challenges. However, our aspiration must remain to have a committed and motivated staff who feel that Flinders is the best place to work and where they feel they are challenged but given opportunities to grow and develop.

5.3 Sharpening our research profile

The review commissioned last year by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) of the Areas of Strategic Research Investment (ASRIs) found that the ASRI initiative had been the catalyst for new thinking about research and research capability and had had a positive impact in some areas on research performance. However the review also pointed to the difficulty that many ASRIs were having in achieving sustainability and a clarity of focus. With a few notable exceptions, industry and/or community engagement remained weak.

I do not think 17 ASRIs are sustainable. Some need to fold, others merge and a few become major ‘light houses’ of Flinders research activity. These should represent areas of Flinders’ research activity that are externally recognised for their innovation, quality and impact: potentially ‘hubs’ in Minister Carr’s ‘hubs-and-spokes’ model of research across Australian universities.
The ASRIs should not be the only strategy for increasing our research capacity. We will also need to think through how highly productive single scholars and small teams can continue to be supported and, particularly, how we nurture early career researchers and new areas of potential importance. Such strategies will be instrumental in ensuring our future reputation for research excellence.

Ultimately, I believe that in research we need to aim for Flinders to have:

- external recognition as the ‘hub’ of a few (possibly as few as 3 or 4) SA networks that are nationally and internationally significant;
- an increased number of Flinders’ academics recognised through election to the learned academies, as highly-cited scholars or by other measures of high professional esteem;
- an improved research ranking in Australian higher education on a per capita basis with an ultimate objective of being in the top 20%;
- an increase in the percentage of research active staff on a robust definition of research activeness; and
- annual improvements in all research indicators that exceed national increases.

I have asked the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) to convene a broadly based working party to recommend possible strategies towards these objectives and establish firm baselines and realistic targets. Given the importance of research for the future standing of the University, I intend to commit the bulk of the Vice-Chancellor’s Strategic Initiatives Fund in support of these strategies.

5.4 Increasing our attractiveness to students

I believe that it is time for a significant rethink of undergraduate education at Flinders with the aim of increasing applications for our courses. Accordingly, I have asked the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) to undertake the following:

- a critical review of all degree programs, as a direct response to the outcome of this year’s SATAC round in which we struggled to fill places and too many degrees had too low a cutoff;

- to analyse, in particular, the implications of the following options:
  - raising the minimum TER for the majority of Flinders’ degrees;
  - allowing automatic second year entry to Flinders’ (high TER) professional courses from the generalist degrees if students complete their first year with a sufficiently high GPA; and
  - allowing faster progression by an expanded summer school, teaching over more weeks in the year or more in the evening. I would expect this to be an attractive option for high performing students in particular as well as allowing all students, if they wished, to attend at more convenient times.

- to investigate the feasibility of making work-integrated learning an explicit feature of all undergraduate programs at Flinders. We already have some exemplars. For example the mandatory 20 week industrial placement in the Bachelor of Engineering is highly valued by industry and adds significantly to the employability of graduates. More generally, I endorse a broad conceptualisation of work-integrated learning that encompasses working for the public good and in community and other socially-engaged settings. I recognise that incorporating work-integrated learning into all programs will have cost implications.
Accordingly, I believe it will be necessary to reduce the number of degrees and topics to free up staff, both academic and general, for other activities such as liaison with industry and community organisations about placement opportunities.

Our attractiveness to students depends not only on the courses we offer and the quality of our teaching but also the whole student experience. Unfortunately, Volunteer Student Unionism has been a factor in this decline. While VSU is unlikely to be repealed, it is pleasing that the Commonwealth has the quality of the student experience on its agenda. I am also keen to see the student experience at Flinders enhanced and will be keen to see what we can do in this regard.

5.5 Maximising the use of available resources

This has a number of aspects: ensuring a high level of administrative efficiency and effectiveness; ensuring that we manage efficiently the funds we have and use our assets as creatively as possible; and ensuring that we explore all avenues for maximising revenue.

With regard to the first, I believe that Flinders’ devolved structure offers many benefits: it encourages entrepreneurial spirit in the cost centres and allows adaptation to local cultures and values. However, it is clear that there are some deficiencies and weaknesses including:

- a tendency to ‘silo behaviour’;
- duplication of services;
- insufficient communication of best practice;
- some feeling that there has been a cost shift from the Central Administration to the faculties; and
- existence of multiple processes that impact negatively on the ease of cross Faculty engagement, which is (or should be) a defining feature of Flinders.

I have asked the Executive Director of Administration to convene a working party of people from both Central Administration and the faculties to advise me on possible changes to address these issues, ensuring also that an appropriate level of accountability is maintained.

With regard to the second, Flinders has an excellent record of sound and prudent financial management and we are well served by the quality of external advice that we receive through the Resources and Audit Committees of Council. Yet, we should always look to do better. I was very pleased to learn of the establishment by Resources Committee of an Investment Committee to consider a more aggressive but still appropriate investment policy for the University’s cash and bequest holdings. I think we should also use our strong balance sheet (the University carries no debt) to our advantage. Thus, I have asked Resources Committee, with input from the Central Administration, to consider whether we are driving our balance sheet as hard as we could. Moving from the standard two semester time table to a trimester arrangement and/or teaching more in the evening would utilise our fixed assets more efficiently and potentially allow the capital budget to be deployed for other purposes. To support this, I will ask the Central Administration to give me some recommendations on the more efficient management of space, including teaching space. I also intend to review the internal budget and resource planning process so that the budget and capital infrastructure plan are more transparent and more explicitly linked to, and driven, by the strategic plan.
Finally, while it is to be hoped that, in time, the Federal Government will increase public funding, I do not see a time when it will not be expected that universities need to maximise revenues from every possible source. The reform of the Public Affairs and Development Offices has this as a long-term goal. For the same reason, I believe it important that the University continues its focus on a sustainable, diverse and growing international student load. In addition to ensuring the viability of what is now a significant component of the University’s total income, this would allow us to assist the State achieve its ambitious goals in international education. I have asked the Deputy Vice Chancellor (International), in consultation with the Faculties, to review our current international strategies and advise me of new strategies that might be considered to achieve this goal.

6. The Way Ahead

If these five themes resonate with the Flinders’ community I can see them becoming the pillars of the strategic plan for 2010-14. For the moment, I propose that they guide my own priorities and act as an overlay on the Operational Plan and priorities flowing from FSPFD. Hopefully they will also assist everyone from Council to our newest staff member and our students to reflect on the Flinders they would like us to become and the strategies necessary to achieve that aspiration. Documenting that vision and the associated strategies will be a major focus of 2009.

Let me conclude with a few thoughts on that process. I would like the process to be as inclusive as possible, involving facilitated discussions with a range of interest groups, but would also wish the result to be sharp with relatively few goals and clear targets or indicators of success. This process will need to revisit the vision and purpose of Flinders as alluded to earlier. We should also consider some of the big questions. Should we aim to become bigger? If so, how and over what timescale? Have we too narrow a discipline mix? Too broad? Should we become a dual sector institution? What are the key drivers and limitations?

In the case of Council, I am interested to hear the role you would like to play. I would suggest that we start the process with a retreat, possibly off campus, in early 2009 at which we discuss the big strategic questions. Following this retreat the Flinders’ Executive would then develop ideas and various options for further refinement through subsequent engagement with Council in its regular meetings. A standing item on the 2009 agenda would seem sensible leading up to the meeting in October when I would anticipate the final plan is presented for formal approval.

An exciting twelve to eighteen months lies ahead of us. I look forward to working closely with Council to address the challenges facing us and to position Flinders effectively for the next phase of its history.

Michael N Barber
Vice-Chancellor and President
Flinders University

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