

**THE OFFICE AND ROLE OF VICE-CHANCELLOR
IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES**

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ABSTRACT

The position of vice-chancellor is of vital importance in universities but it has attracted little research attention. This study investigated the office and role of vice-chancellor in Australian universities in response to three simple questions that formed the research problem: How is the office of vice-chancellor defined? Who are the occupants of this office? What do vice-chancellors do?

The study focussed on the office and role of vice-chancellor in the period 1963 to 1986 and not upon individual incumbents. Most of the research reported relates to the years 1983-86, before the changes to Australian higher education inaugurated in 1988.

The conceptual framework of sociological and ethnographic enquiry used organisational culture as a key variable. The research approach viewed the university, the context of the office, through an analysis of four organisational models: the bureaucratic, collegial, political and anarchical. None provided sufficient account of the organisational culture of a university; and a pluralist perspective was advanced to accommodate both divergent and congruent elements of each model. Among characteristics identified with implications for the office and role of vice-chancellor were the labour intensive nature of the university and an orientation to extensive personal interaction.

Data were obtained through three principal methods: from documentary evidence including parliamentary legislation, university resolutions and other published materials; by a diary analysis survey completed for fourteen days in 1986 by all vice-chancellors; and by interviews with serving and former university officers. This triangulation of methods provided abundant and interlocking data.

In response to the research questions, data were analysed to furnish information about such matters as: the legal and formal basis to the office; appointment procedures and selection criteria; a social characteristics profile of incumbents in 1963, 1973 and 1983; incumbency patterns from 1963 to 1986; and the work patterns of incumbents in 1986. Most of this research is without precedent and appropriate reference was made to comparable research about university presidents in the USA.

This study has established substantial and basic information about the office and role of vice-chancellor in Australian universities. The prospects for further research are extensive.

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PREFACE

At the conclusion of this study opportunity is presented not only to acknowledge the diverse influences upon and contributions to the thesis but also to account for circumstances relating to its completion.

The writer enrolled in September, 1985 and made considerable progress in collecting data and publishing parts of the study. Further progress with data analysis was subsequently disrupted necessitating enrolment suspension for personal and professional reasons including: the death of parents; disruptions associated with institutional amalgamation and disamalgamation; and an intensive involvement in national education reviews in Vietnam from a commitment initiated before enrolment. Although each of these events has been a learning experience, their value as such increases in retrospect.

The writer's interest in the office and role of vice-chancellor arises from almost three decades' employment in universities, not all of which have been Australian. Work as an administrator at the University of Sydney, at the fledgling University of Papua New Guinea and as Vice-President (Administration) at the Asian Institute of Technology preceded his current academic appointment. A concern for occupational differentiation and professionalisation, particularly in rapidly changing societies, culminated in 1975 with the writing of a masters thesis about university administration as a profession. The effect of direct professional relationships with university CEOs of such contrastive philosophy and style as Sir John Gunther and Professor Ken Inglis of the UPNG, and Emeritus President Milton E. Bender Jr. and Professor Robert B. Banks of the AIT must also be recognised as an influence on the writer and this study.

An equally formative element in the development of this research about vice-chancellors has been the writings of practising executives in higher education. While deferring to such seminal works as Weber, Barnard and Mintzberg, particularly in the leadership domain, the writer has often been stimulated by the analysis of the university and its administrative processes expounded by practitioners such as: in the USA – Bacchetti, Bowen and F. Newman; in the UK – Fielden, Lockwood and Shattock; in Australia – Birt, Karmel, Willett and Williams.

Not to acknowledge also the privilege of having spent almost half of one's life working in other cultural settings would be to ignore powerful influences, socially, professionally and intellectually. Continuous involvement, through residence overseas, with societies whose values differ from those of one's society of origin heightens awareness of what is just, true and good (and of what is not) in one's native as well as in other cultures. The part a university

can play in assisting the expression of values and in nation-building is monumental. While it may be unfashionable to dignify a university with so grand a charter linked to values articulation, in many new nations to whose development they contribute, universities, with religious organisations, have often been obliged also to exercise responsibilities of a Fifth Estate including those of a loyal opposition in a Westminster style democracy. Whatever the social context, the organisational processes of a university place in focus the office and role of vice-chancellor.

To sum up these formative background influences that deserve acknowledgment, the writer holds, with sober optimism, a profound belief in the university as an esteemed and residual social institution – neither monochrome in its purposes nor immutable in its operations – without which its host society would be impoverished.

The lack of the fabulous may make my work dull, but I shall be satisfied if it be thought useful by those who wish to know the exact nature of events now past

Thucydides