

Driving the future in changing times

November 2010 saw a first for the ACU, as two network conferences were held consecutively, in Melbourne, Australia. **James Ransom** reports.

For some, the most visible sign of a university evolving with changing times and adapting to the future is a strategic plan or a reworked mission statement; others perhaps notice some internal restructuring or a refreshed logo and brand. However, successful evolution and adaptation is heavily reliant on human resources and public relations departments, and, increasingly, cooperation between them.

The fourth ACU Human Resource Management Network conference – ‘Successful Universities in a Changing World: HR Drives the Future’ – and the third ACU PR, Marketing and Communications Network conference – ‘Changing Times, Changing Markets and Changing Priorities’ – were convened in Melbourne, Australia, in November 2010, with an additional joint day focusing on internal communications, attended by 300 delegates. The past few years have seen talk of change dominate higher education; discussion is often constructive but has increasingly been framed within talk of crisis and overhaul, lending itself to short-term overreactions and fear of the future. Australia proved an ideal host for discussion, having managed a period of funding cuts over the past ten years, and the conference facilitated the sharing of best practice and practical, realistic preparation for the future.

Delegates from throughout the Commonwealth attended, and they share many similar issues and face similar situations. It emerged that most participants had worked in HR or PR departments in both the private and public sector, and several speakers expanded on the similarities and differences between the two. Indeed, even the talk of ‘crossing over’ from the private to public sector implies a great divide and, whilst some may no doubt enjoy the distance afforded from the private sector, many lessons and ideas are drawn from it that are highly applicable in higher education institutions – from retention strategies to the use of social media.

Whilst the Human Resource Management (HRM) Network conference spanned leadership to recruitment, capacity building to performance management, staff unions to

organisational complexity, and trends in the law to managing an international workforce, the PR Network conference covered branding challenges to media strategies, reputation management to social networking, advertising to cultural understanding, and handling budgetary constraints to engaging with local businesses. The joint day on internal communications, however, brought together the experience and knowledge from professionals in both networks, and explored an area vital to strengthening universities in all regions of the Commonwealth.

Professor Steven Schwartz, Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University in Australia, opened the joint day with a plenary session entitled ‘Forgive me Father for I too have spinned’, in which he advocated ‘ethical marketing’ – projecting an accurate, clear and truthful image of the university that not only benefits the institution, but is fair to competitors. The session set the tone for the rest of the day: though competition is forever increasing in higher education, an effective long-term approach improves both internal communications and external perceptions, and this in turn creates an environment which engenders sustainable competitiveness. Through a combination of breakout and plenary sessions, HR and PR strategies were explored, with the

eventual conclusion that a positive external image is often a reflection of a congruent internal communications policy, and that both human resources and public relations overlap a great deal to provide this.

Within a university, cooperation between departments is crucial; often, interdependence is not enough by itself. However, both human resources and public relations departments have their own specific roles to play in a university, and these were considered in depth either side of the joint internal communications day.

Professor Dave Ulrich, a world-renowned HR expert, provided the opening keynote speech at the HRM Network conference. Challenging received perspectives of managing HR in universities, he addressed issues of values, talent and performance, and presented an outside-in model for the future of human resource management. The next plenary outlined the challenges currently facing higher education and those that can be expected in the future, and how best to meet them. Professor Glyn Davis, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Australia, spoke of the implications for existing institutions of new private universities, of the increase and importance of online and distance learning, and of the flow of international students to



The opening session of the conference



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A session on the joint internal communications day of the conference

and from the emerging economies of India and China. League tables, student welfare, and the role of research in universities and how this is beginning to vary depending on the student demographic were also covered, together with university leadership and sources of university funding.

Plenary and concurrent sessions were followed by best practice sessions, where staff unions in South Africa and career planning processes in New Zealand were examined, and reports on the future academic workforce were heard from Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Bruce Rosengarten, of the Passionate Leadership organisation, spoke of the HR leader's challenge in complex organisations, an especially important topic as studies demonstrate that 70% of an individual's performance is attributable to their leader, and that a good leader can obtain 30% more from their employees. In particular, he emphasised communication strategies, comfort zones, work-life balance, and recognising and responding to the culture of 'politicking for success'. Further best practice sessions looked at Bangladesh and New Zealand, and plenaries explored the art of people management, using the case study of a Canadian library, and how impact is measured in UK universities. In some institutions, HR departments have clearly set the pace; in others, the department is seemingly chasing the institution. The effects of funding cuts are often felt particularly hard in HR departments, yet the need for these departments actually becomes greater in times of financial constraint. A recurring message from the conference was there is no 'magic bullet', but that, when time can be found amongst day-to-day troubleshooting and tackling 'business as usual', careful planning and policymaking, together with leadership and cross-university

collaboration, is the key to success.

Dr Max Blouw, President of Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada, provided the opening keynote for the PR, Marketing and Communications Network conference. Expanding on the conference theme of changing times, markets and priorities, he outlined the global realities facing universities and the implications of ongoing trends such as the move towards universal higher education – affecting all member institutions – and the importance of engendering support for change management. The theme of the conference, he concluded, was particularly timely as universities are facing pressures today that are most likely permanent. Following this, Ovidia Lim-Rajaram from the National University of Singapore explored the changing dynamics of communications in higher education, drawing on the effective use of new social media and the implications for university branding.

Despite challenges, it is an exciting time for communications in universities, reflected in the exceptional quality of the ACU PR, Marketing and Communications Awards 2010 winners, who were awarded their prizes at the presentation ceremony held at the conference gala dinner (see page 18-19 for the results).

Dr Stephen Holmes, Managing Partner of The Knowledge Partnership, gave the keynote speech on the final day of the conference, addressing reputation management in universities as a basis for effective branding and positioning. It can be hard to change reputations through traditional 'visual branding' approaches, and it is not the concept of reputation management that is flawed, but often the approach towards it. As universities become more global, their reputation becomes more important, and often this is defined by just two or three individual factors. Together

with other breakouts and plenary sessions, strategies for approaching the future of marketing and communications in universities emerged, and Peter Reader, Director of Marketing and Communications at the University of Portsmouth, UK, and outgoing Chair of the PR Network committee, closed the conference with reflections on constant change – what will change and how we should prepare, especially in light of more students, more universities and more competition, but less money. The 'personalisation of education' will increase, but there will also be greater structural changes within the university sector itself.

Both conferences, together with the joint internal communications day, brought together many issues and facets of change. All-encompassing change within universities is not necessarily the answer to the changing environment of higher education. There is much that universities are doing well, as evidenced by the quality of the best practice sessions and individual case studies; change should be selective and tailored. And neither should careful change and adapting to the future be seen purely as a response to greater economic and political realities in an interconnected world. Change should be encouraged regardless, in the name of continuous improvement, and, as universities move away from short-term survival measures and instinctive reactions and towards long-term competitiveness, students and society will benefit as much as university staff themselves. ■

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