



Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association

Restructuring: What's in it for Us(yd)?

A Student Perspective – 14 June 2006

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay our respects to them and their elders.

I would also like to highlight that representative student participation in forums such as this and the University's governance more generally is under threat.

- Voluntary student unionism legislation takes effect from July 1.
- Continued survival of our student organisations is far from guaranteed and this could have significant impacts on our University.

As such, I would like to acknowledge the people who have assisted with the preparation of this presentation by providing me with information and advice. They include undergraduate student representatives Nick Wood (SRC President) and Tom Patton (SRC Education Officer); SRC staff member Don Sword (Education Research Officer) and SUPRA Policy Adviser, Gina Browne; and also the 25 elected postgraduate student members of the SUPRA council.

The University of Sydney Senate gave approval for a major restructure of the University's senior management at its meeting of March 6. In the days and weeks following this decision, corridors, meeting rooms, staff rooms, study spaces and inboxes were filled with murmurings.

As the President of the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association, responsible for representing the interests, needs and aspirations of about 14,000 postgraduate students I knew almost nothing of the proposed changes. No detail of the restructure was given at the student associations' pre-Senate meeting with the Vice Chancellor and Registrar on the Friday before the decision was made.

In an all-staff email the Vice Chancellor wrote: "This process must be **led by academic planning for research and teaching** backed by enhanced support portfolios. Neither can be successful without the improvement of the other and progressive improvement is an interactive engagement of the two." (my emphasis).

He continued: “It is true, of course, that this will signal the start of a transitional process **with full consultation** which will see the evolution of new structures in the Faculties and Colleges.” (my emphasis)

In order to achieve the first of these aims, he announced the introduction of the position of Provost, explaining that the Deans would report to the Provost.

- The intention of the position is to '**optimise the feedback loop.**' (my emphasis)

And concludes this section by stating: “**Nobody should feel threatened** and everyone should feel stimulated.” (my emphasis)

Yesterday, I attended the Graduate Studies Committee of the Academic Board. As the President of SUPRA I am a member of the Academic Board and a number of Board committees, as is the SRC President.

During the meeting, a discussion began about the review of the Academic Board and its standing committees. It was asked whether it was ideal to be commencing this review at the current time, given the planned university restructuring, it was agreed that the review would take time and so there was no harm in these two things happening simultaneously. The substantive issue was not cause for concern, the uncertainty and lack of information about the proposed restructuring was.

A member of the committee used as an example that they had heard that one faculty would be turned into an institute within a larger faculty. Another member of the committee seemed to confirm that this would be the case and that another faculty would be turned into a college within the same super faculty. Around the room there were many confused faces.

What was of serious concern within this brief encounter was the clear lack of common or shared official knowledge about the proposed restructure. I must admit I found it quite reassuring to know that I was not the only one being kept in the dark.

I remind you of the Vice Chancellor’s comment when announcing the new organisational structure, He wrote: “This process must be led by academic planning for research and teaching...”

I also remind you of some of the general and advisory functions of the Academic Board, that “subject to the governing authority and powers of the Senate and to the powers of the Vice-Chancellor, the Academic Board has principal responsibility to oversee and monitor the development of all academic activities of the University; and to provide advice to the Senate and the Vice-Chancellor on:

- (a) academic matters relating to and affecting the University’s teaching and research activities and its educational programs, including general advice on the academic priorities and policies of the University;

- (b) academic aspects of the formulation and review of the University's strategic plan;
- (c) policies concerning the academic aspects of the conditions of appointment and employment of academic staff.

It is almost impossible for me to reconcile these two things. If the proposed restructure "must be led by academic planning for research and teaching" and the Academic Board is responsible for overseeing and monitoring the development of all academic activities of the University and providing advice on academic matters then, why are members of the Academic Board so unclear about the proposed changes?

The work of the SRC and SUPRA can be classified in many ways as academic. We are concerned with the student experience and thus we are heavily involved in the functions of the Academic Board.

It is perhaps more than a little alarming then that most of my understanding of the proposed changes have come from an article in Honi Soit and from the NTEU.

Education officer, Tom Patton, a student representative from the SRC, writes in Honi Soit about the restructure:

"There are a number of alarming questions still unanswered by the University Administration.

1. Why is this necessary now?
2. What is the motivation behind this massive reform agenda?
3. What will the consequence be for academic, administrative and support staff?
4. Why hasn't there been open communication with all faculties?
5. Why haven't students been consulted?
6. Is Education being left alone because it is going to be cut (in a similar fashion to what happened to Nursing in 2004?)"

It would seem Tom and students generally are not alone in their lack of knowledge. Many academic staff also seem unclear about the proposed changes and reasons driving them. The promise of **full consultation** seems unrealised as yet.

The Vice Chancellor, when announcing the new organisation structure, wrote "We must bring the Deans, and their local areas, much closer to policy development and implementation." To achieve this, he announced the introduction of the position of Provost, explaining that the Deans would report to the Provost. The intention of the position is to 'optimise the feedback loop.'

It would appear then that the Provost is to be responsible for ensuring that all sectors of the University involved in academic policy formulation, implementation, feedback and review work together.

Interestingly, it could be said that the role of the SRC and SUPRA presidents could in many ways be seen as similar to that of the responsibilities of the Provost.

We might expect to see the Provost to take a leading role in planning and policy directly related to a range of core education activities such as:

- scholarship provision,
- learning and teaching strategies,
- University admissions,
- a close working relationship with the Deans and the Academic Board,
- oversight of University responses to sectoral changes eg: Federal funding and legislative programs that impact directly on learning and teaching

I would argue that the SRC and SUPRA have been an integral part of this process, particularly through their membership of the Academic Board and its Committees and through regular meetings with the Vice Chancellor on Senate issues and the Senate through liaison committee meetings.

Perhaps coincidentally, changes to the University's senior management structure with the objective of 'enhancing the feedback loop' have been introduced at the same time as the Federal Government has acted to prevent two of main current contributors to this communication cycle, the SRC and SUPRA, from performing their functions through the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU).

It is crucial that student participation in the decision-making that impacts on the student experience is maintained.

Colleges and Faculties

Prior to abolition the three academic colleges, Sciences and Technology, Humanities and Social Sciences and Health Sciences, were each headed by a Pro-Vice Chancellor. Alongside the relevant Faculty membership of the College there existed an Administration Manager, Human Resources personnel, a finance team and staff responsible for the management, provision and allocation of research and teaching facilities. The Pro-Vice Chancellors (College) had responsibility for overall academic leadership; budgets, staffing, building usage and equipment. They reported directly to the Vice Chancellor.

The College Framework is used for Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) and University Postgraduate Award (UPA) scholarship allocations. Upon receiving an annual allocation from the University the Colleges assigned them to the Faculty members of that College. Funding allocations for the Postgraduate Research Support Scheme (PRSS) are also distributed through the college structure.

At the Senate/SUPRA Liaison Committee meeting on 9th May 2006 SUPRA requested the University to advise what provisions had been made for the continued allocation of funding relating to postgraduate study that had been reliant on the College structure.

The University advised that postgraduate schemes and activities will continue to be allocated along the College model structure for the remainder of this year and possibly for 2007 and that "The Dean of Graduate studies and the DVC (Research) have put a strategy in place so that with the abolition of colleges none of the Postgraduate Schemes and Activities (including PG Scholarships) is affected." SUPRA is yet to be consulted about this proposed strategy.

It is crucial that future allocation schemes formulae and policies used for postgraduate funding and scholarships ensure scholarship provision for postgraduate research students across all disciplines continues.

It is possible that the abolition of the Colleges and the proposed consolidation of the Faculties can serve to simplify the access and processes students are requested to undertake to administer their degrees. It is possible that the scholarship needs of postgraduate research students will be better met under the new structure. However, the absence of student participation or consultation on this and the many other areas that the colleges were responsible for makes me less convinced that these possibilities will become a reality.

As well as playing a pivotal role in scholarship allocation the Colleges also had a wide range of academic functions, many of which impacted on students.

Where these responsibilities, initiatives and programs were undertaken at College level it is important that both the University and the new Faculties ensure that there is provision of funding and resources including staffing which continue to be made available for these activities, which have a direct impact on and are vital to study and to the student experience generally.

Engaging and consulting with the student representative associations in developing this new structure is crucial to minimising student related problems associated with the new structure.

Likewise there are a number of faculty specific policies, procedures and protocols that will need to be reviewed. Again, student input into this process is crucial.

Any resultant Faculty mergers or consolidation will require careful consideration of existing Faculty based procedures developed for University wide policies and whether they need to be reviewed. Faculty mergers could allow for greater opportunity for the sharing and adoption of best practice in

procedure and protocols applicable to academic policies. However, it is also important to caution that benefits to the University are not always beneficial to students. Without consultation and input from students in these decisions many problems could arise. We know what faculty policies cause student difficulties, we know what works for students and what doesn't...SUPRA and the SRC have this knowledge in our case files of thousands of students...

The college structure has in many ways allowed for the socialisation of resources. Recent discussions within a specific faculty with regard to funding and the issue that arise from this socialisation is perhaps important to note.

There are serious concerns that if degree programs that do not meet the University's strategic aims, or perhaps more accurately the interpretation of the strategic aims, then programs will be cut. Further, there is concern that the new faculties, in a similar way to what has been occurring within current faculties, will begin to be assessed and resourced on the basis of full-fee paying, or revenue gaining activities.

Recent debates around Political Economy in the Faculty of Economics and Business is a relevant example. It has been suggested that funding be linked to levels of student fees of those enrolled in the discipline. The "issue of how faculties will fund those subject areas that are not deemed 'profitable' has not been satisfactorily addressed". Further, how long faculties that are not profitable will be maintained is also not clear...how will the changeover be made from 9 to 7?

The Vice Chancellor's letter on the new university organisations structure states: "***Nobody should feel threatened*** and everyone should feel stimulated." In a community of academics, of thinkers, of scholars, we realise how powerful information and knowledge are. To ensure that we can actively participate in these decisions and stimulate change we need to be informed and included, Until that time it is perhaps little surprise that the corridors, meeting rooms, staff rooms, study rooms and inboxes are filled with a sense of worry of an unknown threat.

The Vice Chancellor and the Provost have given assurances that current degree programs will not be impacted as a result of the restructure. Unfortunately, similar assurances were given in relation to the closure of the undergraduate teaching program at the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery. According to our sister representative association, the SRC, many students from this faculty have since reported that resources continue to diminish.

The higher education sector is changing rapidly. Over the past decade over 5 billion dollars has been cut from tertiary funding (SRC Education Officer). This has placed endless pressure on universities to prioritise "efficiency", focus on competition and reward financial profitability. Unfortunately, these actions often undermine essential, core principles of universities. Within these frameworks things are lost, students become consumers, smaller (read: less

full-fee paying student) departments and courses are cut, less-profitable research is less supported, infrastructure and resources are allocated on “wealth” not on need...

Just this morning, in the Research Committee of the Academic Board, the Acting DVC (Research) mentioned the formation of a Research Strategy Group and said that this group would have a representative from each new faculty. No mention was made of student representation on this strategy group. .

With the shift from Academic Board committees to Strategy Groups, the Provost is apparently concerned that when restructures occur too many new committees are created, and they are seeking to prevent this by the creation of strategy groups instead. There is serious concern from the tone of the discussion this morning that these groups are more than just a name change, they are a shift in where the decision making lies within the University governance structure.

In the current political climate there are continual drives to push the higher education sector into a corporate framework. It is inevitable that the University needs to respond to this pressure from the Federal Government. It is becoming more and more evident that this current proposed restructure is not just an attempt to realign the University to enable “ambition inspired by achievement”, translated roughly into 1:5:40 but also to ensure that the University is “efficient” (Provost) ... and “competitive”.

The division of governance of the University between the Senate and the Academic Board should allow for a balance between efficient, sustainable, responsible management practices and innovative, quality academic practices. There is a need to ensure that this separation and the ability for students to participate in both of these decision-making bodies is maintained.

At present, perhaps the biggest concern is that very little clear information has been handed over.

The Academic Board, with the active participation of student representatives, needs to be given the authority to participate in the decisions which shape our University.

Students need to be adequately consulted, proposed models should be shared, input should be sought, amendments should be made. Involving student representatives and the Academic Board in the restructure will ensure that the new structure serves the best interests of the University, not as a corporation but as a place of learning and teaching. The Academic Board is responsible for maintaining this aspect of the University’s work...it is crucial that within the structure this is not lost.

There is flexibility in the proposed restructure. I initially heard the Vice Chancellor wanted five faculties, this was then revised to 7 faculties. It now

appears that the general consensus is that there will be 9, for now. The fact that there has been flexibility, the fact that there has been discussion and negotiation should be seen as a positive thing. What is of concern is where those discussions and those consultations occurred.

Unfortunately, no consultation on the restructure has taken place with the student body. My understanding is that there are many academic staff who are also completely uncertain about the restructure. Not involving the university community, both staff and students, in the process of restructuring the organisations is a flawed decision.

As a student representative I have access to an immense catalogue of knowledge and experience that can assist the University to realise its strategic goals. Without adequate consultation and participation in the decision making process about this restructure there is a real possibility that while some aspects of the strategic plan are realised other aspects such as the student experience, learning and teaching and research and innovation may decline.

I would like to conclude by thanking the Chair of the Academic Board for the opportunity to address you today and add a student perspective to these proposed changes.

In the current uncertain times for our representative student organisations, the SRC and SUPRA, it is crucial that those members of our university community who support student participation in University decision making make these views public.

I hope that for many years to come SUPRA Presidents will have the opportunity to address similar forums of the Academic Board and provide a student perspective on the academic governance of our university.

Thank you.

*Since the presentation of this response the Provost has provided some background on the restructure to the University Senate. SUPRA will be preparing a response to this for circulation to the Academic Board and the Senate.