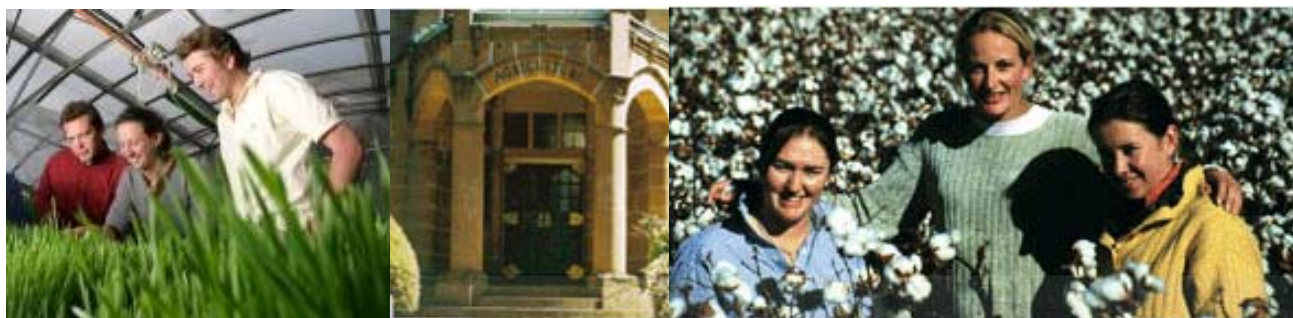


ACADEMIC BOARD PHASE THREE REVIEW

REVIEW TEAM REPORT

Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources



1 April 2008

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SECTION I: PREFACE

(1) Background

The Academic Board reviews are intended to encourage an academic culture within faculties that values scholarship, free inquiry, intellectual rigour and honesty, supporting, in turn, the development and maintenance of high standards of teaching, scholarship and research.

In 2001, the Academic Board initiated a cycle of collegial reviews of the academic activities within faculties with a view to supporting faculties in developing effective academic quality assurance process. These were followed up in 2003 with a second phase of faculty reviews, which expanded the scope to include all elements within the University Strategic Plan.

The focus of Phase 3 Review of the Academic Board's reviews is to encourage and assist faculties to reflect on the key elements and processes of their academic environments and culture, and formulate ways in which these can be improved. The Review is based on the Faculty's Self-Evaluation Report (SER), which provides an overview of the Faculty's assessment of its culture and processes and their success in effecting continuous quality improvement. To guide the development of the SER, faculties were invited to address criteria adapted from the Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence 2007.

(2) The Review Process

The Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources presented its SER to the Academic Board on 3 September 2007, along with a number of supporting documents and relevant data. The Review Team met on 14 September 2007 to consider these materials.

The Review Visit took place on September 17 2007. The key purpose of the visit was to enable the Review Team to assess the robustness and validity of the Faculty's judgements.

This final report has been reviewed by the Learning and Teaching and the Research and Research Training Committees of the Academic Board and approved by the Academic Board. A copy will be posted on the University's quality assurance website at www.usyd.edu.au/quality

Implementation

Within six weeks of the date of approval by the Academic Board, the Faculty is required to provide the Board with a response to the Recommendations contained in the Review Report, indicating how the Faculty will build the Recommendations into Faculty planning processes.

Twelve months after the date the Report was approved by the Academic Board, the Faculty is required to provide the Board with a progress report responding to the Recommendations.

(3) Membership

Review Team

Associate Professor Peter McCallum, Chair

Professor John Christodoulou, Faculty of Medicine

Professor Elizabeth Cowley, Faculty of Economics and Business

Professor Frank Nicholas, Faculty of Veterinary Science

Dr Susan Thomas, Faculty of Arts

Professor Keith Trigwell, Institute for Teaching and Learning (Observer)

Senior Faculty representatives

Professor Les Copeland, Dean

Dr Lindsay Campbell, Discipline Leader (Sciences)

Professor David Guest, Associate Dean (Undergraduate Studies)

Dr Michael Harris, Discipline Leader (Agricultural and Resource Economics)

Professor Ivan Kennedy, Associate Dean (Research)

Professor Alex McBratney, Pro-Dean

Professor Peter Sharp, Director, Plant Breeding Institute

Professor Richard Trethowan, Professor of Plant Breeding

Students

The Review Team met with two groups of students: eight undergraduate students; and eight research higher degree students, together with one postgraduate coursework student (as there were insufficient numbers of postgraduate coursework students, this student joined the postgraduate research group for the purposes of the meeting).

The Review Team acknowledges the need to be careful about generalising the views of a small group of students to the whole student body.

SECTION II: OUTCOMES

This section summarises the main findings and lists the commendations, affirmations and recommendations of the Review Team. It should be noted that, in addition, other favourable comments and suggestions for improvement are mentioned throughout the text of the Report. The report draws on the information provided in the Self-Evaluation Report as well as discussion with staff and students. In some places, text from the Self-Evaluation Report has been incorporated directly into the text.

(1) Introduction to Findings

The Faculty's academic focus is the science and economics of the agri-food and fibre sector, the natural resources involved in that sector, and agribusiness. Research and teaching are delivered from three distinct disciplinary groups: Agricultural Science, Agricultural and Resource Economics and the Plant Breeding Institute.

The Faculty has a national and international reputation in research across all of these disciplines, and its research centres, the Plant Breeding Institute, the Australian Centre for Precision Agriculture and the SUNFix Centre for Nitrogen Fixation, operate at the leading edge of research internationally. The Faculty also contributes to several Cooperative Research Centres.

The Review Team found that both staff and students experienced the benefits of a strong learning community in the Faculty within an environment of demonstrated research-led teaching.

The Self-Evaluation Report and discussions with staff and students during the Review Visit brought out a number of issues and/or areas of concern which are addressed further within this Report. These issues may be summarised as follows:

1. The Faculty has an admirable emphasis on quality and on sustaining and enhancing existing strengths. The Review Team felt, however, that it would be worth considering whether, in the current climate, more ambitious aspirations and a more proactive strategy for achieving them might now be more beneficial for the next phase of the Faculty's development. There could be benefits in defining aspirations more clearly in some areas (in postgraduate coursework programs, for example, where current enrolments are very low (35 students in 2007)).
2. The Review Team was of the view that there may be opportunity for the Faculty to position itself better, particularly in the light of the increasing importance to Australia of the research and training it provides in areas of strategic national importance, including climate change. It is important that the Faculty develop a focused development strategy aimed at strengthening local and international student recruitment.
3. There are ongoing implications arising from the transfer of Animal Science training to the Faculty of Veterinary Science, with the establishment of the Bachelor of Animal and Veterinary Bioscience (BAnimVetBioSci) degree, which need to be addressed.
4. The Faculty could benefit from an increased focus on the development of its international networks.
5. Recent changes in the University's and Sydnovate's approach to contract negotiation is impeding access to research funding from primary industry and, in some cases, jeopardizing existing negotiations.
6. The poor standard of some of the Faculty's Camperdown campus facilities is a cause for concern.

7. A summary of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations follows. It should be noted that these are not prioritised by the Review Panel: they are listed in the order in which the relevant issues appear in the SER.

(2) Commendations

Areas where the Academic Board commends the practices of the Faculty are as follows:

1. The Academic Board commends the Faculty on taking a broader view in allowing a significant proportion of its load to be taught outside the Faculty.
2. The Academic Board commends the Faculty for its commitment to growing research student numbers and encourages the Faculty to develop strategies (in line with the recommendations on marketing, recruitment and international networks) that will enable it to continue to do so.
3. The Dean and senior leaders are commended for fostering an open and inclusive leadership and communication style within the Faculty.
4. The Academic Board commends the Faculty for the effort it has made to make students feel part of the academic community within the Faculty.
5. The Academic Board commends the Faculty for the mechanisms it has in place to ensure that feedback on undergraduate units of study is implemented and that advice on any such implementation is provided to students as soon as feasible.
6. The Academic Board commends the Faculty for its financial support to new staff to attend international conferences.
7. The Academic Board commends the Faculty for the strategies it has in place to embed graduate attributes in units of study and to inform students of this process.
8. The Faculty is commended for its explicit and effective use of research-led teaching in its coursework programs.

(3) Affirmations

Areas where the Academic Board affirms the Faculty's identification of the need for improvements to its practices are as follows:

1. The Academic Board encourages the Faculty to follow through on its intention to develop courses within areas of its expertise which would be of broad interest across the University, such as the environment, climate change and sustainability in order to enrich the University's general curriculum and compensate for the load loss it experiences in allowing its students significant study opportunities in other faculties.
2. The Academic Board affirms the need for the Faculty to develop curricula with an emphasis on food production and supply, such issues being central to the future of humanity, as a strategy for attracting new cohorts of students to its degrees and units of study.
3. The Academic Board affirms the need for mechanisms to be developed to enable greater collaboration between the Faculty and the Faculty of Veterinary Science so that students have more options to take Animal Science units of study as part of the Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (BScAgr) degree, while minimising the negative impact on Faculty EFTSUs.
4. The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's identification of the need for further work to be done with alumni and the rural community.

5. The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's commitment to the development of a more formal staff mentoring program and recommends that such a program focus on teaching, provided the Faculty is satisfied that good research mentoring is available through an individual's research group.
6. The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's commitment to the development of a more formal induction process for new staff including the production of an Induction Manual.
7. The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's intention to proceed with planning for a centralised research building.

(4) Recommendations

Areas where the Academic Board recommends improvements to the practices of the Faculty are as follows:

1. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consider its committee structure to see where efficiencies might be made that would help to address the issue of workload.
2. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty give high priority to the development of an effective marketing strategy, to target both local and international students.
3. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consider how it might develop more proactive strategies to develop and, where appropriate, to raise its academic aspirations. A mechanism for this might be for the Faculty to establish an Advisory Board, with wide industry representation and an external chair, as a focus for stakeholder involvement in future strategic planning.
4. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty review its strategies for addressing student recruitment issues, consider reviving its media campaign and consider a coordinated plan for communicating with government, teachers, students.
5. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty explore mechanisms for optimising the engagement of distant students with activities on the Camperdown campus, for example improving transportation between the Camden and Camperdown campuses and developing teleconference facilities.
6. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty develop a flexible workload model, taking into account some of the models already developed in the University.
7. The Academic Board recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the DVC (Research) be requested to examine the impact of the University's and Sydnovate's current philosophy and practices on the Faculty's longstanding collaborations with rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) and, if appropriate, facilitate a solution which ensures the Faculty's capacity to continue these research relationships.
8. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty address the reasons for the continuing delays in putting lecture notes on WebCT.
9. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty review its compliance with the Academic Board policy on parallel teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate coursework units of study.
10. The Faculty is encouraged to explore avenues by which research students can be given opportunities to develop skills and expertise in academic teaching.

11. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consider the introduction of Faculty guidelines for research supervision to supplement the University-wide code of conduct, and better advise postgraduate research students of their opportunities, obligations, and thesis options.
12. The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consult with students over the issue of identification of discipline streams on degree testamurs.

SECTION III REPORT

(1) INTRODUCTION AND FACULTY PROFILE

With 753 students in 2007, the Faculty is one of the smallest faculties in the University. This small size brings with it both benefits and challenges. There is a strong sense of community in a small Faculty, and staff expressed concern at the potential loss of autonomy and identity if the Faculty were merged with another group.

A theme that has emerged from the Review is that, as a consequence of its size, the Faculty feels the burden of compliance (both internal and external), and the consequent struggle to remain in control of its own destiny. The Review Team recognise this issue to a degree and the challenge it presents for the Faculty. The Review Team considers that the Faculty would be best served by taking a proactive strategic approach, developing ambitious but well considered aspirations which move beyond sustainability to growth.

The Faculty has drawn attention to a number of challenges, which are addressed below:

1.1 Infrastructure

Considerable concern was expressed by both staff and research students at the poor state of the Faculty's infrastructure, in particular on the Camperdown campus. It is alleged that facilities such as the Glasshouse are below international standard and this has an impact on international recruitment of both students and senior academic staff. The Ross Street building is a major problem, and investment in facilities has been held up, pending its replacement. The Review Team formed the view that communication on this matter is not as good as it should be, and this should be a priority for the Dean (the Review Team noted that the Dean was also not fully informed on developments). It is important for the Faculty to recognise that building works have a lengthy decision process, and to make every effort to ensure that staff know what stage of that process has been reached.

1.2 Degree Structures and Interfaculty Collaboration

The structure of the Faculty and the nature of its undergraduate degrees mean that a considerable amount of teaching is done in other faculties (in 2006, the Faculty taught only 57.44% (410.9 EFTSU) of the total load of its students of 715.5, teaching just under half (46.63%) of the total undergraduate load attributable to students enrolled in its degrees). The Faculty noted that there are institutional barriers to collaboration and innovative approaches to teaching as all faculties wish to protect their own EFTSUs and hence their funding base. The Review Team recognises the barriers to full co-operation between faculties inherent in the funding model. While the Faculty might feel its funding base would be better protected by devising courses with less content from other faculties and fewer options, the current approach appears to serve student interest best and is commended by the Review Team.

The flip side of this, however, is that the Faculty needs to find ways to balance this lost load by creating courses of wide general interest across the University.

Commendation 1

The Academic Board commends the Faculty on taking a broader view in allowing a significant proportion of its load to be taught outside the Faculty.

Affirmation 1

The Academic Board encourages the Faculty to follow through on its intention to develop courses within areas of its expertise which would be of broad interest across the University, such as the environment, climate change and sustainability in order to enrich the University's general curriculum and compensate for the load loss it experiences in allowing its students significant study opportunities in other faculties.

1.3 Faculty Size and Impact on Workload

It was noted that Committee workload is relatively heavier in a small faculty. The Faculty continues to need certain faculty-level committees and representation on University committees. However, small efficiencies may still be possible and the Faculty might consider, for example, joint representation with another faculty on Academic Board Committees.

Concerns were expressed at the cost to a small faculty of compliance, for example in policies such as Students at Risk (it was noted that FlexSIS does not support the Faculty well in this) and Travel Requests.

Recommendation 1

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consider its committee structure to see where efficiencies might be made that would help to address the issue of workload.

1.4 Student Recruitment

(a) All students

The view was expressed that, despite increased demand for graduates, there is a diminishing interest in agriculture as a profession, arising to some extent from the impact of the drought. The establishment, in July 2007, of the Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture, which will focus on perceptions of agriculture and strengthening student recruitment, will provide some support to the Faculty in dealing with this. It is important to ensure that the Government was made aware of the looming shortage of people with appropriate skills that can be applied to agriculture and natural resource management. The primary industry research and development corporations share the Faculty's and the discipline's concern, recognising that agriculture is now a high-technology industry which needs well-trained people. The Review Team was pleased to learn that students have been involved in Faculty debate on student recruitment. The students who spoke with the Review Team were universally enthusiastic about the career prospects for graduates of the Faculty and felt that more information about the nature and career prospects of degrees in the Faculty should be provided, particularly to careers advisers.

The Faculty advised that external stakeholders were involved in the Faculty's strategic planning process, specifically the future of the Faculty's teaching and research programs. It was not, however, clear how information from external stakeholders is being used to proactively address the issue of building student numbers.

(b) International Students

The Review Team was concerned that insufficient attention was being given to international recruitment strategies: the Faculty needs to agree on the appropriate numbers of international students and identify target areas in the region where the Faculty's programs would add value. It is important for the Faculty to develop further its strong existing international networks and forge links with developing countries, for example through the China Scholarship Council. Recent Government changes to vocational areas required for residency status could have a positive impact on the Faculty, and the Faculty could be more proactive in taking these into consideration in its planning for the future.

Recommendation 2

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty give high priority to the development of an effective marketing and recruitment strategy, to target both local and international students.

1.5 Future Strategies

With two economics degrees, the Faculty is the leading provider of programs in agricultural and resource economics in Australia. The Faculty recognises that a key part of its future academic directions will be associated with the social science disciplines in addressing issues of agricultural and rural adjustment. The view was expressed that there is a need for additional academic positions

including specialists in extension and rural sociology. Moving in this direction would be a significant shift, requiring transformation in the Faculty and approval at Government level.

The Faculty also recognises that there should be more emphasis on food production and supply as an issue central to the future of humanity, which has always been a major focus and has a solid research base. This issue takes on a renewed urgency with the potential impact of climate change. Options exist in particular for the development of postgraduate coursework options in this area, including units of study offered across the University which may be available to students in other coursework masters programs. It was noted that the opportunity for interdisciplinary study was a topic under review in the Provost's Strategy Group on Postgraduate Coursework and that opportunities may open up for the Faculty as this process develops. The Faculty had a very small number of postgraduate coursework students and this is a sector which has significant growth potential.

Affirmation 2

The Academic Board affirms the need for the Faculty to develop curricula with an emphasis on food production and supply, such issues being central to the future of humanity, as a strategy for attracting new cohorts of students to its degrees and units of study.

1.6 Research Students

The Review Team noted that the Faculty was relatively strong in research student enrolments. Senior Faculty staff suggested that the Faculty had the capacity to grow its numbers from the current 110 up to a maximum of possibly 170, which would correspond to, on average, each member of academic staff taking on one new research student each year.

Commendation 2

The Academic Board commends the Faculty for its commitment to growing research student numbers and encourages the Faculty to develop strategies (in line with the recommendations on marketing, recruitment and international networks) that will enable it to continue to do so

1.7 Rebuilding undergraduate programs that cater for students interested in livestock production in an agricultural context

The transfer of Animal Science teaching to the Faculty of Veterinary Science with the establishment of the Bachelor of Animal and Veterinary Bioscience (BAnimVetBioSc) degree in 2005 has resulted in a range of difficulties for the Faculty. The Review Team was advised that this had an impact on the UAI cut-off across agricultural science courses, a loss of load for the Faculty, and a decline in the numbers of students from rural areas. Training in livestock production is currently available to students through the Faculty of Veterinary Science, but there is a perception that the University no longer caters for students from a rural background who are interested in agricultural science with a livestock production specialisation. To the extent that Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (BScAgr) students can no longer specialise in Animal Science in year 4, this perception is now a reality. Some students feel let down with the changes and there was a perception in the Faculty that the BScAgr degree has a higher attrition rate because of this.

The nature of collaboration and EFTSU sharing with the Faculty of Veterinary Science has presented problems. The Dean has expressed the view that the process of the transfer of Animal Science training to the Faculty of Veterinary Science has gone far enough and is eroding the intention that the BAnimVetBioSc degree have a strong input from Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (FAFNR). To transfer further load to the Faculty of Veterinary Science runs the risk of weakening FAFNR at a time when it has already lost load. The issue has been raised in various fora within the University, but at the moment it remains unresolved. One solution proposed was the introduction of a 4th year livestock production unit of study within the Faculty of Agriculture although how such a course would be staffed and resourced by the Faculty is not clear.

Affirmation 3

The Academic Board affirms the need for mechanisms to be developed to enable greater collaboration between the Faculty and the Faculty of Veterinary Science so that students have more options to take Animal Science units of study as part of the Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (BScAgr) degree, while minimising the negative impact on Faculty EFTSUs.

(2) LEADERSHIP

2.1 How Senior Leaders Lead

The Faculty has identified its key leadership style as being one based on building personal relationships. Communication within the Faculty is aided by its small size. The Dean knows every staff member and what they are researching and encourages other leaders in the Faculty to adopt his open style of communication.

On the basis of information available to it, the Review Team formed the view that this management style works well in a small Faculty. Staff and PhD students are satisfied with this style of communication/leadership and staff work well across boundaries. Staff appreciate the Dean's open door policy and communication style. The informal approach is supported by formal meetings and a variety of written communiqués. Staff felt that these communication channels were very good and provided an excellent supplement to informal communication.

Nevertheless, there are some consequences of an informal leadership and communication style that need monitoring and it is important that senior management continue to assess the effectiveness of this style. It is important that information distribution to individuals (particularly part-time or junior staff) not be dependent on that individual being around at the right time. There is also a risk that views expressed informally may not always acted upon, and it is important that faculty leaders are alert to the potential for students to be drawn inappropriately into Faculty politics when detached, objective mechanisms for communicating issues are not used. Nevertheless, the overall impression was of a positive, relaxed and constructive work environment.

Commendation 3

The Dean and senior leaders are commended for fostering an open and inclusive leadership and communication style within the Faculty.

2.2 Social responsibilities

The culture within the Faculty values honest scholarship and ethical behaviour in academic endeavour, values which are publicly espoused by the most senior levels of leadership. The overall research and academic process drives and supports ethical behaviour. The University Code of Conduct is used to communicate University policies regarding ethical behaviour, and breaches of the codes are managed in accordance with the requirements of the Enterprise Agreement.

The Faculty has identified a range of key communities and has acknowledged the need for further work to be done with alumni and the rural community.

Affirmation 4

The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's identification of the need for further work to be done with alumni and the rural community.

(3) STRATEGIC PLANNING

3.1 Strategy Development

The Faculty's Strategic Planning Process has been underpinned in recent years by the four major planning forums it has held since March 2005. These events were designed to facilitate the Faculty's strategic planning process by posing a range of questions about the future of the Faculty's teaching and research programs, discussing the key challenges for the Faculty and proposing a number of solutions to address these. The Faculty advised that the involvement of external stakeholders in the forums ensured a broad and balanced discussion of issues. The Review Team felt, however, that there was not always a strong sense of what the Faculty does with information gathered from stakeholders. This view was echoed by some staff who felt that communication with stakeholders is not as good as it could be because it relies to a large extent on individual contacts.

With respect to the Faculty's key strategic academic objectives, the Review Team felt that there was perhaps too much emphasis on maintaining and enhancing the Faculty's current position, rather than a proactive approach to strategies that could increase the Faculty's future chance of success.

During the visit, the Review Team raised the possibility that the Faculty might consider establishing an Advisory Board as a mechanism for obtaining greater stakeholder input, using as a model Advisory Boards established in other faculties such as the Faculty of Economics and Business. It was noted that the SER had mentioned that 'Due to the breadth of stakeholders, and because the Faculty participates extensively in external events and fora, the Faculty does not have an Advisory Council'. Nevertheless, as a formalised mechanism for stakeholder interaction, an Advisory Board, with an external Chair from industry, could have benefits in supporting the Faculty in shaping and achieving its goals. The Dean agreed that there was potential for the Faculty to create an Advisory Board and that this could provide focus and support for the Faculty to lead debate and initiatives on issues of public import such as climate change.

Recommendation 3

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consider how it might develop more proactive strategies to develop and, where appropriate, to raise its academic aspirations. A mechanism for this might be for the Faculty to establish an Advisory Board, with wide industry representation and an external chair, as a focus for stakeholder involvement in future strategic planning.

3.2 Strategy Deployment

The SER provided examples of how the Faculty turns its strategic plan into action plans for implementation. Important aspects of this process are:

- the Faculty assigning responsibility for tasks to key individuals and ensuring integration and Faculty-wide deployment through relevant committees and boards;
- establishing measures of success to track progress on strategic objectives and for performance projections.

(4) STUDENT AND STAKEHOLDER FOCUS

4.1 Knowledge of students and stakeholders

The Faculty advised that it invests considerable time and resources into engaging students and stakeholders across the student lifecycle, the aim being to ensure that students achieve their individual aspirations while meeting the expectations and needs of industry and employers. The Faculty has a wide range of mechanisms for obtaining and using student, stakeholder and market knowledge. These include formal teaching evaluations forums, marketing activities, feedback from school visits, interaction with employers and staff-student liaison meetings.

4.2 Student and stakeholder relationships and satisfaction

(a) Building relationships to attract, satisfy and retain students and stakeholders

Attracting students

This issue is also addressed within the overall Faculty profile and Strategic Planning sections. To ensure its sustainability into the future, the Faculty must develop strategies to attract students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, locally and internationally. While the Faculty does have a range of activities it uses for this, the Review Team formed the view that the profile of the Faculty could be raised through marketing and media campaigns. The Review Team was interested to see the media strategy developed by Cox and Inall Communications for improving the profile of the Faculty but did not receive any strong indications as to how this was being followed up for the 2008 intake. Marketing and media exposure are critical for the Faculty to move forward in attracting students. The Review Team felt that there was scope for improved planning with regard to the extensive work that needs to be done in speaking to government, to teachers and to potential students. This is a considerable task and will need careful coordination of The Review Team does not underestimate the size of this task and the human resource implications of this task.

Recommendation 4

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty review its strategies for addressing student recruitment issues, consider reviving its media campaign and consider a coordinated plan for communicating with government, teachers, students.

(b) Building a sense of community

The Faculty has a number of activities for building a cohesive student cohort. These appear to be effective and students were enthusiastic in their praise of the Faculty for building a friendly and supportive environment. They feel that they receive a level of support not available to students in a larger Faculty and that they are very much part of the academic community in the Faculty. Students are able to seek not only academic advice, but also career advice from their lecturers. Staff-Student Liaison committees work well and, as mentioned above, the small size of the Faculty allows for a good deal of informal discussion so that students feel well informed.

Commendation 4

The Academic Board commends the Faculty for the effort it has made to make students feel part of the academic community within the Faculty.

At the same time, there are some factors which inhibit certain cohorts from fully participating in the academic life of the Faculty. To some extent this includes the relatively large numbers of students taking units of study in other faculties, though this is balanced by the compulsory components taken in AFNR. There are also some issues in respect of research students. There is some sense of isolation for students in other campuses although there are significant numbers of research students and staff at the Camden and Narrabri campuses. Transportation is a major problem for research students on the Camden campus

as it is accessible only by car and the distance from the Camperdown campus means that research students are not able to attend research seminars at Camperdown. Accommodation is also an issue for students at the Camden campus. Research students in the Agricultural and Resource Economics Discipline do not readily understand the predominantly scientific topics of research seminars and this reinforces the isolation of this group.

Recommendation 5

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty explore mechanisms for optimising the engagement of distant students with activities on the Camperdown campus, for example improving transportation between the Camden and Camperdown campuses and developing teleconference facilities.

(c) Determining student and stakeholder satisfaction

The Faculty makes effective use of student feedback from surveys, using this to implement changes as necessary in subsequent years. Students are advised of changes to courses or units of study that had been made on the basis of feedback, and students confirmed that they were made aware of the impact of their feedback in this way. Students also pointed out that timing was an issue in obtaining the outcomes of feedback so they did not personally experience changes made on the basis of their own feedback, and that some new lecturers obtained more frequent feedback on an informal basis. Information on the outcomes of student feedback is also made available to students through staff-student liaison meetings. The Review Team formed the view that the Faculty had well developed and well implemented mechanisms for closing the feedback loop in this way.

Commendation 5

The Academic Board commends the Faculty for the mechanisms it has in place to ensure that feedback on undergraduate units of study is implemented and that advice on any such implementation is provided to students as soon as feasible

(5) MEASUREMENT, ANALYSIS AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The Review Team notes the Faculty's summary of the data used to measure performance and support Faculty decision making

(6) WORKFORCE FOCUS

6.1 Workforce Engagement

Workforce engagement is achieved by the Faculty through both the close and personal involvement of Faculty leaders and the use of the University-wide PM&D process to align personal, Faculty and University objectives. The PM&D process is also used to initiate specific staff development programs and is also used as an effective focus for mentoring (see below). There are no specific evaluation methods in place to determine workforce engagement but the anecdotal evidence provided and comments from staff during the visit indicate that the Faculty's broad approach works effectively.

The Faculty places a strong emphasis on mentoring and the Review Team explored this strategy in some depth. Staff expressed the view that formalised research mentoring is not always successful, and that mentoring occurs to a large extent as a matter of course within research teams. Furthermore, a significant number of academic staff is research only and they are well mentored on a day-to-day basis. While there was generally a view that formalised mentoring works best for teaching, some junior staff are happy with limited or little mentoring and feel better able to shape a course when left alone to do so. Staff were satisfied that mentoring was appropriately conducted within the framework of the PM&D.

Affirmation 5

The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's commitment to the development of a more formal staff mentoring program and recommends that such a program focus on teaching, provided the Faculty is satisfied that good research mentoring is available through an individual's research group.

Another example of the Faculty's commitment to engaging its workforce is the Faculty allocation of a pool of funds for new staff members to attend international conferences in the first three years of their appointment, so that they do not have to utilise their start-up research funds for this purpose.

Commendation 6

The Academic Board commends the Faculty for its financial support to new staff to attend international conferences.

6.2 Workforce Environment

The Faculty advised that although there is no formal model, there is a broad understanding of the performance expectations of staff. The Faculty has identified its orientation and induction process as a weakness and is developing an induction manual. The Research Committee does, however, provide a formal system of support for new staff in the writing of grant proposals. While staff confirmed that they would welcome a more formal induction process, they confirmed that the 'management by walking around' technique (also referred to in the Leadership section) provided a supportive environment for staff.

Affirmation 6

The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's commitment to the development of a more formal induction process for new staff including the production of an Induction Manual.

The Faculty has also affirmed the need to undertake a thorough review of workloads, work allocation and workforce management of general staff. The Review Team explored the development of a workload model for academic staff with a number of groups during the Review Visit. The Faculty has advised that it has taken a pro-active approach to academic workload management, and that the teaching load of the Faculty is balanced to provide early career staff the opportunity to develop their research. Staff confirmed the importance of developing a workload model and stressed that a range of factors would need to be taken into account including numbers of students taught (not just face-to-face hours) and the impact of workloads arising from new University policies such as the Students at Risk policy.

Recommendation 6

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty develop a flexible workload model, taking into account some of the models already developed in the University.

6.3 Impact of University-wide policies on workforce engagement

The Review Team has also noted the Faculty's comments that it welcomes recent changes which allow faculties to provide more input to University policies before they are implemented. It has, however, expressed concern that changes and lack of clarity on processes for signing research contracts, particularly those involving Sydnovate, have had an important effect on the Faculty, over which it has had no control. The difficult relationship with Sydnovate was raised throughout the meeting by different groups. The following points were made:

- Sydnovate conveys no apparent appreciation of the importance of relationship building between the Faculty and external funding sources that are also answerable to their stakeholders; the Faculty felt that this affected the University of Sydney brand and reputation among those funding sources.
- Unless issues are resolved or the university agrees to underwrite the research programs in question, research will cease in some research centres in the near future.
- Staff may take their research to other institutions and the rural RDCs may go elsewhere for their research; there was concern that the conjunction of Sydnovate's new approach combined with reduced research resources within these organisations caused by the drought might lead to permanent damage in the Faculty's research relationships.

The Faculty expressed the view that an adversarial environment has been created where the University is regarded poorly by external agencies.

Recommendation 7

The Academic Board recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the DVC (Research) be requested to examine the impact of Sydnovate's current philosophy and practices on the Faculty's longstanding collaborations with rural RDCs and, if appropriate, facilitate a solution which ensures the Faculty's capacity to continue these research relationships.

(7) ACADEMIC PROCESS MANAGEMENT

7.1 Coursework Program Design and Delivery

In May 2003, the Faculty implemented a new non-departmental organisational structure in which undergraduate degrees were to be coordinated through “science” and “economics” discipline groupings. The leaders of the discipline groups are responsible for maintaining the quality and integrity of the teaching programs within the discipline groupings, promoting excellence in teaching among members of the academic staff of the discipline groupings, and ensuring that research in the discipline areas informs the teaching programs.

(a) Course development process/Curriculum review/Monitoring program effectiveness

The Review Team noted the Faculty’s collaborations with other faculties in program building despite the problems of loss of load (Commendation 1). It supports the Faculty’s intentions to build cross-faculty units of wide appeal to counteract this (Affirmation 1).

(b) Rewarding innovation and excellence in teaching

There was some discussion on the use of the Scholarship Index to support and reward staff achievement in teaching and learning and the Review Team was advised that these funds are largely socialised across the Faculty rather than individually allocated. It was also noted that all staff now undertake the Graduate Certificate of Higher Education as a confirmation requirement.

(c) Course program design

The Review Team was impressed with the strategies the Faculty has in place to ensure high academic quality, address student and stakeholder needs and achieve sustainable educational programs. There has been considerable emphasis on the mapping of graduate attributes, with curricula designed accordingly. This effort is supported by a staff member who was appointed to help with teaching and mapping graduate attributes. Students have a good understanding of generic attributes and how these are embedded in units of study.

Commendation 7

The Academic Board commends the Faculty for the strategies it has in place to embed graduate attributes in units of study and to inform students of this process.

(d) Coursework delivery

The Faculty employs a combination of delivery and learning strategies to engage students in active learning, stimulate their curiosity and enhance their motivation to learn. It also emphasises the importance of research-led teaching in the design and delivery of coursework. The Review Team found that undergraduate students have a good understanding of research-led teaching and how this operates in practice within the Faculty. It also found that 4th year honours students are given opportunities to interact with other researchers in the Faculty and are made to feel part of the relevant research team.

Commendation 8

The Faculty is commended for its explicit and effective use of research-led teaching in its coursework programs

Students commented positively on a range of strengths in the undergraduate program, including the problem based learning approach to undergraduate teaching, and specific supplementary programs such as an introduction to library resources and training in use of databases and preparation of bibliographies. A weakness was highlighted in respect of the use of WebCT, in that students were adversely affected by the delay in getting notes onto WebCT, a problem they had not encountered in other faculties.

Recommendation 8

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty address the reasons for the continuing delays in putting lecture notes on WebCT.

The Review Team also noted that the Faculty appears to be continuing to operate in contravention of the Academic Board policy on parallel teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate coursework units of study. The Faculty's comments on the outcomes of previous Academic Board Review recommendations on this topic indicated that this had been resolved. It appears, however, that postgraduate coursework students continue to take undergraduate units of study and the only difference between the two segments is that postgraduate students have to do some additional work to bring the unit to the postgraduate level.

Recommendation 9

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty review its compliance with the Academic Board policy on parallel teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate coursework units of study

(d) Support for Teaching and Learning

The Faculty has advised that its ability to deliver improvements in student management and quality control has been hindered by deficiencies in University-wide systems and processes. There are fundamental problems with student management, including FlexSIS, and management of the enrolment process.

7.2 Research

Current major research strengths and areas of national research leadership include:

- Crop sciences and technologies (plant pathology, cereal rust diseases, plant breeding, plant biotechnology, cereal grain science, precision agriculture);
- Land and water resources (soil science, spatial information systems, rural environmental chemistry);
- Agricultural, environmental and resource economics, development economics.

These strengths and core competencies are determined primarily through the Faculty's strategic planning process, supplemented for research activity by the 2004-2007 Faculty Research Management Plan.

(a) Processes and actions for supporting researchers to achieve research excellence at an international level

The Faculty has a range of strategies to support researchers. An ARC research grant 'bounty' in the form of a small grant to staff who submit ARC applications and support in research grant proposal writing from the Research Committee and senior members of staff have significantly improved the Faculty's ARC success rate. Financial and other support is also provided to staff to enable them to attend conferences and participate in other research activities.

While there are excellent field sites for research on University farms, the Faculty has drawn attention to the difficulties it faces in achieving a high quality research culture on the Camperdown campus because of the infrastructure problems of outdated buildings and equipment, coupled with locations spread across five buildings. The Faculty is working hard to bring to reality a centralised research building to address this.

Affirmation 7

The Academic Board affirms the Faculty's intention to proceed with planning for a centralised research building

A problem that emerged during the Review Visit was that different research groups in the Faculty continue to operate in isolation from each other and that research staff are almost

exclusively within the Research Centres. It was felt that there were opportunities for more inter-Faculty collaboration and cooperation. For example, it was noted that co-location with the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the Camden campus had led to collaboration. The view was expressed that senior management could be more proactive in driving communication.

(b) Research Training

The Faculty has over 100 research students, of whom 28% are international students.

Activities in place to enhance the experience of these students include the Annual Research Symposium. This Symposium has been successful in helping to create a research culture. In 2006 it was organised by the research students which was of particular benefit to them in enhancing their experience in the Faculty.

The Review Team was interested in exploring the teaching training that might be available to research students in the Faculty. Some research students are involved in teaching although in general there is no training for teaching or tutoring within the Faculty. It was pointed out that it is possible for postgraduate students to be employed as part-time level-A academics (Postgraduate Fellows), but this was not widely known.

Recommendation 10

The Faculty is encouraged to explore avenues by which research students can be given opportunities to develop skills and expertise in academic teaching.

The Faculty facilitates high quality research supervision through appropriate support mechanisms and monitoring processes. However, concern was expressed by a research student that there are no common guidelines for supervisors and that supervisors do not work to an agreed common standard or set of processes. It was felt that supervisors are not always held accountable by the Faculty; for example, where issues have been identified in progress reviews and are not followed up. There were particular concerns in the Agricultural Economics group where requirements are not always made clear to research students. Research students advised that there was no clear advice provided on expected outcomes of the PhD program; for example, conferences attended, papers prepared or published. Some variety in thesis format was noted; for example, some were now in the format of a series of papers (Scandinavian model) but there was insufficient information on submitting a thesis in that form. Students advised that they were not aware of the oral examination process available to PhD students.

Recommendation 11

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consider the introduction of Faculty guidelines for research supervision to supplement the University-wide code of conduct, and better advise postgraduate research students of their opportunities, obligations, and thesis options.

Research students also raised some specific issues with the Review Team. One of these related to the expenditure of their research allowance. Requirements for supervisor approval frequently led to unwelcome delays and it was proposed that a mechanism might be instituted to allow research students a limited allowance without prior supervisor approval. The Review Team believes this an issue worthy of investigation within the framework of the University's Financial Delegations policies.

Another issue related to the identification of streams on testamurs. The view was expressed that it would be beneficial to students if streams were indicated.

Recommendation 12

The Academic Board recommends that the Faculty consult with students over the issue of identification of discipline streams on degree testamurs.