

The Faculty of Arts Funding Saga

PAUL CRITTENDEN*

The Review of the Faculty of Arts began in mid-1993 and was completed early in March 1994. The Report of the General Review Group was finally released eight months later, in November. A detailed Faculty Commentary on the Report was drawn up within a few weeks and was tabled at the December meeting of the Academic Board. The covering letter which I sent to the Vice-Chancellor with the Faculty Commentary on 9 December 1994 included the following statement:

The Faculty of Arts is now in a situation in which an imminent and disastrous threat hangs over the major role it has hitherto held in the national and international standing of the University. We believe that the scale of what needs to be done if the University is to continue to have an outstanding Faculty of Arts is made clear in the Faculty Commentary on the Report. This case is made, not in aggressive competition with other faculties in the University, but in a spirit of commitment to the humanities and social sciences as critical to the idea of a university and in the hope that the whole University will be united in seeking a cooperative and practical commitment to the continuing high quality of the Faculty of Arts.

The threat which hangs over the Faculty is contained in the funding formula which was introduced in 1992. In response to funding cuts which came with the formula, the Faculty has shed 58 academic positions since 1992 and finds itself faced with the need to shed at

**Paul Crittenden is Dean of the Faculty of Arts. This article is reproduced from the April 1995 issue of SAUT News.*

least another 60 positions by 1997 (the equivalent of four middle-sized departments). At this point the staff/student ratio would be heading for the sky and even then, the funding provided by the Arts weighting per 'student unit' would not, after salaries are paid, leave enough for necessary general expenses.

The scale of what needs to be done can be set out succinctly once the main parameters of student load, staff numbers, and the level of infrastructural support are clarified. I will not go into the details here, but on any reasonable account of what is needed, the budget shortfall in Arts right now in 1995 is close to \$2 million; and from 1996, on current budget projections, the shortfall will stabilise (so to speak) at somewhere close to \$5 million per year (around 25% of the total operating budget).

The desire of Arts not to be forced into aggressive competition with other faculties for scarce resources is perhaps a pipe-dream in the current situation. The Vice-Chancellor has argued that an increase in resources flowing to one area necessarily involves a decrease in resources to others, it appears that, if Arts is given what it needs, other faculties must lose what they need.

In this framework, the big question set by the Vice-Chancellor for the Review Group was to look at teaching programs and provide advice about 'what should go, and what should stay'. In the event, the Review Group decided that a more basic question was to ask what academic programs should be found in a large Arts Faculty in a university such as ours. In that light, the Review Report affirmed the range and diversity of the programs offered at Sydney and acknowledged the excellence of the teaching programs and the high quality of scholarship and research. Not surprisingly, the Report concluded that more funding was needed.

The Academic Board in February affirmed the need for adequate funding for Arts to maintain and enhance its academic programs, but the Board also endorsed a recommendation that opened up yet again the prospect that a sizeable part of the Faculty will have to be excised. Everything has now been referred to the Vice-Chancellor and awaits his response.

Pan of the sub-text of the saga is a perception on the part of some critics that Arts expanded recklessly, especially in the 1980s, thinking that it could eat its cake and keep it. This perception, which

has been around since 1991 when the funding formula was adopted, is demonstrably false but nonetheless very damaging. It smacks unhappily of the spirit of cutthroat competition and the desire to find a scapegoat rather than to look for co-operative solutions. It might also reflect an unwillingness in some quarters to acknowledge how inadequate the much vaunted planning and management procedures of the past few years have been. In support of teaching and research in a major part of the University.

On well-attested criteria, the Faculty of Arts at Sydney is the best of its kind in the country. It is possible—though I do not believe it—that the University can no longer afford to maintain a large Faculty with something like the current range of programs in the humanities and social sciences. If this is so, it should be said without delay. The long, drawn-out uncertainty and continuing stress of the past few years is highly unsatisfactory for staff and for our many undergraduate and postgraduate students. At the same time, there should be no doubt about the determination of academic and general staff in Arts, and of some 6000 Arts students, and of numerous others in the University and the community, to be prepared to fight to secure the funding that is needed to maintain a strong Faculty of Arts. In the crisis concerning Arts, the character and future well-being of the University as a whole is at stake.