

C·A·U·L

COUNCIL OF

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIANS

Mr Roderick West
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Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy
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18 December, 1997

Dear Mr West

Thank you for meeting with the Executive Committee of the Council last Friday. It offered a most useful opportunity to explore some of the implications of the discussion paper *Learning for Life*.

As I mentioned during the meeting, our concerns focus on three aspects:

- *Collaboration to underpin competition,*
- *Coordination in infrastructure, and*
- *Competitiveness in the international arena,*

all of which must be supported by *adequate and ongoing investment* in the nation's information infrastructure.

Learning for Life draws timely attention to the benefits which will flow from more conscious and widespread application of information technologies to higher education. It does, however, appear to overemphasise the possible cost savings: we would suggest more emphasis on the potential benefits to educational access and pedagogy.

These benefits will flow from a national strategy to invest in information infrastructure to support learning and research in Australian higher education. This infrastructure - the nation's libraries, communications networks, information technologies - is essentially collaborative in nature. No university (or, indeed, other) library can today claim universality: all, worldwide, depend on each other to provide information resources through collaborative and complementary action. The Internet is similarly collaborative: its success as a 'network of networks' depends on agreed common standards and interoperability throughout the globe. Other examples include high performance computing and large scale research datasets. Our

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universities are increasingly, and desirably, competitive but that competitiveness depends on a strong infrastructure created through collaborative action.

The existing information infrastructure has suffered from a lack of coordinated and adequate investment over the last two decades. As several reviews have noted, it is running down to the point at which it will no longer be able to support internationally competitive teaching, learning and research. Restoration of the information infrastructure will demand adequate investment by universities, stimulated and complemented by national funding through the proposed National Information Infrastructure Fund and supported by strategies to increase private investment.

To be effective, such investment in higher education's information infrastructure will need to be coordinated. Central direction is neither desirable nor appropriate but uncoordinated institutional investment will not restore a national information infrastructure comparable to those being developed in Asian nations, let alone those available to the higher education communities of North America and Europe. Australia needs a coordination mechanism similar to the very successful JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) in the UK, the National Information Infrastructure Committee.

In short, it is the view of the Council of Australian University Librarians, that, to be internationally competitive, our universities need to be able to draw on a sound national information infrastructure developed through collaborative and coordinated action and supported by adequate investment from the universities and other public and private sources.

Yours sincerely

Alex Byrne
President, Council of Australian University Librarians
and
Chair, University and General Research Libraries Section,
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cc Mr Clem Doherty