

## HERDSA Annual Conference Gold Coast, July 2011, Dr Carol Nicoll

### I have a dream...

On 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King Junior delivered a speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. The gathering was for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The speech lasted only 17 minutes but its inspirational punch delivered a message about the fight for racial equality that resounded around the US and energised the civil rights movement.

The story goes that the most poignant rhetorical device of the speech was impromptu and a response to a call from the crowd by the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson to King to “Tell them about the dream Martin”.

So I begin with apologies to Martin Luther King and acknowledgement that I have no expectation that I will have such a stirring impact on you as he did on his audience. And whilst I do not want to suggest that what we face in teaching and learning in higher education is anything like the fight for civil rights, I do want to make the case that it is a cause well worth fighting for because it will make a real difference to current and future generations of Australians.

I have a dream.

In my dream higher education is not portrayed by the sector or viewed by others, particularly politicians and policymakers, as an industry. Rather that higher education is seen as a foundation element of an effective developed nation in the twenty first century. That like other foundation elements of our society such as high quality health or school education systems, without a high quality higher education sector, a nation will not prosper. Its economy will not grow or flourish. Its people will not maintain or cherish the notions of citizenship or democratic freedom that we value, nor be capable of providing the critique of orthodoxies and social inequalities which I believe are essential in functional democracies. The hothouses for generating new knowledge and thinking will not exist.

The viewing and description of higher education as an industry has strengthened over the past decade. We have seen it as a constant refrain in discussions about international education – the quantification of international education – the counting of international students as export dollars. And we have also seen it laced through public policy – the framing of higher education as only a driver of economic growth and nothing else. The British academic Alison Wolf has written about this (*Does Education matter? Myths about education and economic growth*) and I endorse her view that it is problematic that many policy makers have come to see HEIs only for their capacity to contribute to the economy and economic growth. If that is all that higher education institutions contribute then you aren't really educators.

I have a dream.

A dream in which there is an Australian Vice-Chancellor who is brave enough to lead her institution into becoming something that is publicly declared and demonstrated to be an evolution from the Humboldtian vision of a university. That whilst the notion of a university based on the unity of teaching and research was an incredibly powerful organising principle for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that the 21<sup>st</sup> century

demands a different positioning of higher education institutions. This VC will be someone who recognises that learning is at the heart of community expectations of higher education. She will show an awareness that most students, parents and politicians value universities not for their contribution to research but their contribution to the learning experience, for themselves, their children or their constituents.

And as a result of this recognition, she will structure her institution in such a way that supports high quality learning outcomes, whether they occur in the laboratory, tutorial room, through research supervision, work placement or an international exchange. She will encourage her staff through promotion processes and professional development opportunities to focus on teaching as something which is at the very core of the academic's role. She will celebrate the achievements of outstanding teachers.

I have a dream.

In this dream I see a world in which there is recognition that the quality of teaching and learning in higher education is not part of a zero sum game for HEIs. That even in a deregulated market, where there will hopefully emerge a diverse range of institutions competing for students, that a commitment to and achievement of quality across all institutions can be achieved without any institution losing their own competitive advantage. That quality higher education provision can be achieved by all institutions without it being necessary for some institutions to be decried as having a deficit or lesser quality of provision- unless that is actually the reality! That in understanding that collaboration rather than competition can underpin efforts to innovate and improve teaching and learning, whether it is across similar fields of study, across courses, across institutions, across regions or across the nation.

This does not mean that we won't acknowledge excellence where excellence exists. This does not mean we won't recognise problems and challenges where they exist.

I have a dream.

In this dream world academics are not frightened by accountability. It is a world in which accountability for their decisions in relation to assessment, student learning experiences, course design, is an accepted and indeed treasured part of the professionalism of academic life, rather than perceived as a threat to professional autonomy or academic freedom.

I am very optimistic about the maturity of the Australian higher education sector to be able to respond positively to the challenges of the changing context in accountability. I think that Australia's academic community does need to engage more actively in the debate about accountability, outcomes and standards and not just leave it to the few brave (or perhaps foolhardy) souls who are considered to be experts in the field. It is important that all academics and institutional leaders realise that they have a responsibility to be accountable. I do not think that is unreasonable. But it is fair and indeed healthy for our nation and for higher education, that there is an active debate about how the outcomes of higher education should be identified, defined, assessed, measured and aggregated.

My hope is that individual academics and the higher education sector will come to understand the context of accountability in a way that enables them to continue to rightfully question unexplored assumptions, but also positions them to be able to respond in a positive, constructive and indeed healthy way.

I have a dream.

In this dream, data will not be only collected about and by higher education institutions, but will be effectively and appropriately analysed to inform decisions, influence outcomes and produce a better learning environment for students and the workplace for academics. We live in a world in which the availability of data is not the problem – we have too much information and we seem to spend an inordinate amount of time in collecting it.

Technology has enabled an extraordinary expansion in what we can collect about all aspects of life. Technology also enables tracking of performance in new ways but the problem remains to get the indicators of that performance right. There is a risk that whilst technology can enable access to new domains and sources of data – it can also be used to measure things which aren't really relevant or valid as indicators of performance, particularly performance in learning and teaching. We need to be wary that the mere captivating capacity of the technology to measure something does not drive adoption decisions rather than the validity of the indicator.

What we don't have time for is the sorting of the necessary from the unnecessary. In a recent survey by IBM Global Business Services, they found that public sector analytics professionals spend 47% of their time collecting and organising data and less than a third of their time on sophisticated analysis of their data. I fear that we face what some people describe as the 'data paradox' – too much data, too little insight from the data. The obsession with collection needs to move to a stage where we prioritise what we really need, what is important, then make sense of it.

Beyond meeting the challenge of the data paradox, I have a hope that when data are collected about higher education institutions or about student or learning outcomes or about the quality of higher education institutions, that valid, well-managed qualitative data are trusted to the same extent as quantitative data. There remains an innate suspicion of qualitative data - yet some of the more complex problems of higher education, particularly in teaching and learning, cannot be reduced to measurement in a simplistic, quantitative manner.

I have a dream.

A dream in which when people are asked who was the most memorable teacher with a positive influence on them, that instead of saying Ms Williams, my year 12 Modern History teacher; or Mr Barker, my Year 5 teacher; that more and more people will say – Professor Brown, my second year Psychology lecturer; Dr Murphy, my lecturer in Contract Law; or Associate Professor Smith, my PhD supervisor.

I at times sense a reticence amongst academics to describe themselves as ‘teachers’. I suspect there is a sort of elitism and snobbery about this. It is an attempt to distinguish themselves as demonstrably different from a primary school or secondary school teacher because they harbour a fear that their expertise or status will be diminished in some way if they’re described merely as a teacher. I think this is a misplaced fear. I think that pride in being an effective or even better outstanding teacher in higher education is something well worth aiming for. The word ‘teacher’ should be worth claiming proudly by academics as a signifier of their potentially lifelong impact on their students.

My dream is that we get to a point in this country, where whether higher education is offered either on a mass or universal basis, that the learning experience is so positive, with such a life-long impact, that higher education teachers, lecturers, supervisors, are remembered and celebrated for their positive and lasting impact on people’s lives.

I have a dream.

That whilst the ALTC will be closing its operations by the end of September, that its legacy will live on.

Its legacy will be sustained by people like you, by the networks that we have already or are about to establish, by our citations and awards winners, by projects that have produced great outcomes that are documented on our website, and by the work of DEEWR. Let me elaborate a little on some of these.

Firstly, the essential mission of the ALTC, to promote and enhance teaching and learning in higher education, will continue to be delivered by people like you, who are committed to teaching and learning. At one of my more optimistic and reflective moments over the past 6 months, I thought, perhaps it was timely that the ALTC closes now. Perhaps without a national entity to lead on learning and teaching issues, the sector will step up and take responsibility for what after all should be an institutional, a faculty, and an individual academic’s responsibility – effective learning experiences for all students. I am hopeful that this will be the case. But I am pragmatic enough to know that that it will only happen, with people like you within institutions reminding, prodding, provoking, and challenging about teaching and learning issues. So much depends on you maintaining your energy and dedication to teaching and learning. And you will only achieve that as individuals, by working collaboratively with others, who can give you strength, share expertise and at times just provide an understanding and sympathetic ear.

So to that end, I believe that the networks of people committed to particular aspects of teaching and learning established by the ALTC or formed as a result of some ALTC activity, will be an incredibly powerful part of our legacy.

Our Fellows have contributed an extraordinary amount to the sector through their diverse programs of activity and they will continue to meet and work together through an Alumni of Fellows, led by Ron Oliver, and we will provide funding to get this group started. The Discipline Scholars from the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project have proven to be an incredible group of committed individuals who whilst working primarily with their discipline communities, have come together to support each other and contribute to the broader debates about learning and teaching standards in the

context of TEQSA. I have no doubt that they will continue to work together on these issues, without the ALTC to support them.

The Board endorsed as part of our Legacy Strategy an opportunity to build the capacity of key networks and peak bodies to develop national collaborative approaches to learning and teaching issues and to provide ongoing advocacy and leadership for learning and teaching in the sector. So we have been working with a number of peak bodies – IHEAC, IEAA (International Education Association of Australia), DDOGS, CADAD, ACEN, AAIR and ACODE. We will be finalising those arrangements over the coming weeks.

Significantly for this gathering, we have also recognised the contribution that the HERDSA community plays in teaching and learning, and the leadership that has come from this group. We will be providing over \$200,000 of funding to HERDSA to facilitate advocacy for learning and teaching, and provide opportunities for learning and teaching leaders and practitioners to meet and discuss ways to influence educational practices building upon outputs from ALTC/ DEEWR funded projects. The project leaders are Geoff Crisp and Shelda Debowski and I am sure that you will hear more from them and HERDSA over the coming months about the opportunities that this funding will provide for more networking events.

We were also concerned about trying to sustain some of the great discipline based activity that has flourished over recent years. So, we put out a call for EOI for discipline based networks. We were overwhelmed by the response. We received 30 proposals but with only a limited amount of funding available (\$1.5 million), we have had to make some difficult decisions. 16 have been approved across a range of disciplines - Engineering/ICT (1); Business (1); Education (1); Health (3); Creative arts (2); Building/architecture (1); Law (1); Science (5); Indigenous (1). The 5 Science networks will be working together collaboratively with the Deans of Science and other significant ALTC projects in the Sciences to ensure that their efforts are coordinated to achieve the best outcomes.

One of our great success stories was the Promoting Excellence Initiative. The funding from this project has resulted in sector-wide improvements through a strengthened climate of collaboration in teaching and learning. And as a result many collegial conversations have taken place and innovative joint projects and powerful promoting excellence networks (PENs) have formed at the state level, quite independently of the ALTC. Whilst we were not prepared to continue the funding for that Initiative, we did see the value in funding regionally based networks that would offer similar opportunities. So we have approved funding for 5 regional networks across the country and have no doubt that they will continue to provide opportunities for support and networking across the sector. We are confident that DEEWR will make the most of all of these networks in the work that they will do in the coming years.

On August 16th the ALTC will host our final citations and awards ceremony at the Sydney Opera House. It will be an opportunity to acknowledge the contribution of the many outstanding teachers and supporters of learning and teaching across the country. We will acknowledge all citations winners at the ceremony and awards will be presented to the national winners.

We announced our citation winners just over a week ago. 42 institutions will have their staff recognised through citations, and of particular note will be the first citation winner for the Melbourne College of

Divinity. This year the Board approved a new category to recognise the contributions of early career achievers. The Awards committee had been struck last year by a number of outstanding young staff who had achieved great results in learning and teaching but couldn't make the case for the criterion relating to their contribution being sustained over time. In what I think is wonderful reflection of the growing commitment to teaching and learning in the sector, the Committee selected 22 Early career achievers to be recognised through a citation this year.

You are all invited to attend our final Awards ceremony. If you don't receive an invitation but would like to attend, please contact the Events team at the ALTC by phone or through our website and they will send you one. We want this to be a wonderful celebration of what the sector has achieved in teaching and learning and the contribution the ALTC has made in supporting the sector. If you know of people who might now have retired who would want to attend, please let them know they are welcome to approach us for an invitation or let my Events team know so they can send them an invitation. All are welcome but we do need to know who is coming, so please seek an invitation and RSVP.

Our legacy will also live on through a new website which we are building for DEEWR. This site will have an improved and refreshed resource collection covering the contributions from both the ALTC and our predecessor organisations (CAUT, CUTSD, AUTC) to be added to be DEEWR over the coming years. It will be launched by DEEWR at a time of their choosing but we hope that it will continue to provide you and all academic staff with access to links, information and guidance about a range of teaching and learning issues. It will also enable DEEWR to continue to manage their programs through our online portal, allowing online applications and fast turn-around of notifications.

The staff of the ALTC have been overwhelmed by the response from the higher education sector to our closure. I don't think anyone, particularly the Government, could have predicted such a positive response. So on my staff's behalf and my own, I would like to sincerely thank you all for the incredible support we have received since the announcement in January. It has been potentially a very depressing thing to close the ALTC but I think we have all been uplifted by your response and been kept very busy by our focus on ensuring a smooth transition to DEEWR, in the interests of preserving our legacy and to give DEEWR the greatest chance of success.

Despite being deeply unhappy about the closure of the ALTC for personal, professional and policy reasons, I believe it is time that we all accepted its closure and moved on. To borrow again from Martin Luther King's speech – *"Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends."*

So, the time for mourning the ALTC is over. We are very grateful for your support but we encourage you to now engage positively and actively with the new world. The sector is very fortunate that \$50 million of funding has been committed to ongoing programs in teaching and learning that will be administered by DEEWR. A new branch called the Learning and Teaching Excellence Branch will be established in Sydney, up the road from the ALTC offices, from middle of September, but officially from 1 October. It will be led by Suzi Hewlett, whom I will invite to say a few words at the end of my speech. Suzi is someone who cares deeply about education and has worked across a range of roles in higher education and vocational education and training. I know she will be keen to work collaboratively with you all. She

will listen to you and respond to the concerns of the sector. But she will also ensure that the programs that are going to be managed by DEEWR are run efficiently and effectively.

Suzi will be heading up a Branch that will include up to 10 of the ALTC program and awards staff, including Siobhan Lenihan, our current Head of Programs. This means that there will be maintenance of corporate knowledge and expertise as DEEWR takes over the reins of program funding and management. I know that you will continue to support DEEWR in the same way that you have supported the ALTC.

There will also be an opportunity for the sector to contribute to DEEWR's planning and thinking about how to structure their programs and operations. The Minister has appointed Alison Johns from HEFCE to lead a consultation and I would encourage you all to take the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process. I have spoken with Alison and she is very clear that her remit is to lead a "listening tour". DEEWR has set up a contact email for the Johns Consultation and it will be available shortly on the ALTC website and on the DEEWR website. I understand there will also be meetings held in most state capitals and some regional centres and there will be an opportunity for you to make representations at those meetings, as either individuals or representatives of professional associations or groups.

There is no doubt that there will continue to be programs and awards in some shape. Please continue to work on developing proposals and ideas, ready for when DEEWR announces the shape of its new programs, which are likely to be similar to the ones you already know so well.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I would like to conclude by a final borrowing of words from Martin Luther King Jnr which I think aptly summarises the most effective way for us to continue to work in improving teaching and learning in higher education in Australia -

*"We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back."*