



Professor Mark Israel

## Defusing the demographic time-bomb

ALTC Fellow Professor Mark Israel reflects on building a new generation of leadership in learning and teaching

At a recent interview, I was asked by a member of a panel what I thought might be the major challenges facing the sector and his institution over the next few years. I reeled off a string of issues: responding to the Bradley Review's challenges of widening participation while enhancing and deepening student engagement; implementing new quality assurance measures; meeting the institution's own goals of achieving major curriculum reform, embedding learning outcomes, and grappling with the consequences of the economic crisis. Realising the questioner looked somewhat shell-shocked by the nature of this answer, having covered teaching and learning I paused and asked if he wanted me to outline the problems we faced in research.

Frankly, the challenges faced by the sector are quite scary. We will need people who can develop a vision, articulate a strategic response, and inspire their colleagues to engage with and work towards agreed goals. While such influence may be asserted from various levels within a university as distributed or informal leadership, some of these people will need to be found at the top of hierarchies, occupying key positions as 'leaders of leaders'.

Yet, there is little consensus about what kinds of leadership we might need for learning and teaching, let alone how we might end up with people with the appropriate skills and expertise. Indeed, in some cases, academics are nervous about the coercive style adopted by current senior executives, and recent calls for industrial action will bring this into sharper focus. As the challenges grow, we will lose some of our most experienced leaders and managers – what Graeme Hugo\* has called our 'demographic time-bomb' means between one-fifth and one-third of academic staff members will retire over the next decade.

Over the next few months, I intend using my ALTC Teaching Fellowship to explore whether one of the carrots being offered to Australian tertiary teachers – the national teaching awards – might help to develop a new generation of educational leaders capable of grappling with the changes that will need to occur in higher education.

Through the Australian Universities' Teaching Committee, then Carrick and the ALTC, we have created and sustained a national teaching award process that has inspired similar schemes in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Eire. While there have been suggestions that recipients have found their awards to be a burden, the initiators of the awards hoped they might elevate the status of university teaching, improve the reward structure and increase the public profile of academics with strong track records in the practice and scholarship of teaching. As a result, recipients might be seen as strategic assets, playing a key role in developing and implementing teaching and learning initiatives.

Over the next few months, I'll be tracing the history of the national awards and exploring institutional responses – how have universities identified applicants, does the application process in itself improve applicants' teaching, and what have institutions hoped recipients might achieve following their success in the national scheme. *Continued page 66.*

*Continued from page 50.* I also intend surveying and interviewing samples of award recipients to find out what they think about educational leadership as well as what might help them develop their skills, knowledges and capacities in that area. I would be delighted to hear from institutions and individuals with an interest in taking part.

It must be tempting to dismiss this project as absurdly self-referential – an award to look at awards. However, I think that the issues are critical. Have institutions been able to use the awards to accelerate the development of a new

generation of leadership by giving recipients greater authority and opportunities to influence teaching? Or, are we wasting a chance to think strategically, to constructively align different parts of the university system and thereby limit the impact of the demographic time-bomb?

*\*Professor Mark Israel Fellowship is titled 'Agents of Change: using awards for teaching excellence to identify and develop new generations of leadership in learning and teaching'.*

*\*Graeme Hugo is Professor of Geography at the University of Adelaide.*

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- That consideration be given to investigating and articulating sector-wide standards for the undergraduate FYE.
- That top level institutional policies should explicitly acknowledge and be attuned to the transitional learning and support needs of diverse undergraduate first year student cohorts.
- That interested academic and professional FYE staff be facilitated to establish and maintain a FYE community of practice.
- That the ALTC should adopt a leading role in fostering and supporting sector-wide action and consensus on the FYE.
- That an ALTC leadership project be commissioned around facilitating, enabling and enacting academic and professional partnerships.

Other outcomes from the fellowship are a set of 'expert

commentaries' on the first year curriculum case studies collected from a range of perspectives deemed critical to a transition pedagogy. There is a web presence on the ALTC Exchange to disseminate outcomes and provide other supportive resources. An extensive engaged dissemination strategy was also developed, highlights of which include an eBook with 42 FYE exemplars that were part of the 2009 FYE Curriculum Design Symposium. This event, which featured Professor Tinto, was limited to 400 delegates with demand for places far outstripping availability. A DVD of the proceedings is available at [www.fyecd2009.qut.edu.au/resources/fyecd2009\\_movie.jsp](http://www.fyecd2009.qut.edu.au/resources/fyecd2009_movie.jsp)

*\*In 2007, Professor Kift was appointed an ALTC Senior Fellow. In 2008 senior fellowships were renamed ALTC National Teaching Fellowships while associate fellowships were renamed teaching fellowships.*

*Continued from page 36.* We are continuing to explore the ways that the use of digital technologies made our accountability within the Australian law somewhat more complex and within the Yolŋu law, somewhat easier, and what provisions we need to put in place to protect Indigenous intellectual property within both legal regimes.

We still have much work to do. We have yet to report on the extended seminar, and to publish the proceedings. We have more work to do on the website, and a new semester is

just starting where more people will become involved. Others in Japan and the US are interested in being taught from country, and we continue to explore the possibility of similar teaching programs being tried at other Australian universities.

*\*Professor Michael Christie was appointed an ALTC National Teaching Fellow in 2008. He is investigating the participation of Indigenous knowledge holders in tertiary teaching through the use of emerging digital technologies.*