La Trobe as a Teaching University
John Jenkin and Judith Richards

By the time the La Trobe University Act was drafted, several formative decisions about the nature of the new institution had been taken. The founders were concerned from the outset to establish it not just as Victoria's chronologically third university, but as one which was different, and which particularly addressed contemporary educational concerns. The actual readiness to experiment, however, was always qualified by the requirement that, in the words of the founding Act, 'the standards for graduation in the University shall be at least as high as prevails in the University of Melbourne and in Monash University'. One form of difference—the collegiate focus—is the matter for another chapter, but a comparably fundamental decision had already been taken to have the basic academic unit as the school—incorporating academics from several related disciplines—rather than smaller departments or larger faculties. This pointed to a stress on enabling integrated and interdisciplinary studies, which was intended as part of the preferred strategy for establishing a distinctive third university. The Third University Committee had set up a sub-committee, chaired by Professor T.M. Cherry, to draft the Act, including the objectives of La Trobe. Mrs Whitney King, a member of the committee, later lamented the changes imposed by the parliamentary draftsmen. Their surviving proposals, however, included the statement, unique to La Trobe, that it would be a university 'in which all enrolled students will have the opportunity of fitting themselves for life as well as becoming learned in a particular branch or branches of learning'. The Act was also unusual in specifying that the University was to teach, rather than reiterating the more usual formula for 'the provision of educational facilities'. The impulse to be innovative, the drive to maintain parity with the existing universities—which is always difficult to measure except in terms of similarity—the particular sense of social responsibility, and the practice of teaching at La Trobe are the foci for this chapter.

Before beginning to draft the Act, the Third University Committee had interviewed senior officials at Monash, Melbourne, New South Wales and Macquarie universities, and studied the new English universities of Kent, Lancaster, Keele and Essex. From those studies had emerged the proposed school system which has shaped La Trobe's academic life ever since, and always been a source of controversy. The original plan was based on schools—initially four of them—headed by deans with a limited term of office. The deans were to be entrusted with considerable powers, as an alternative to the more usual professorial or 'god professor' model, and they were to be expected to have a 'reasonable' understanding of all the disciplines taught within the school. (Foundation professors, it should be noted, retained considerable freedom of appointment and other action.) Each school was to ensure the provision of a first-year course of 'general education' rather than begin with a more specialised training. After the proclamation of the Act and the establishment of an Interim Council and Academic Planning Board, Professor Cherry (now Sir Thomas Cherry) continued to chair the academic planning process. Among other members of the Academic Planning Board to make significant contributions were Professor Hugh Stretton of the University of Adelaide and Sir MacFarlane Burnet, Nobel Laureate and Director of the Walter & Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research. The founding principles of integrated and interdisciplinary studies, directed away from the estab-
lished specialisations and towards breadth and flexibility continued to be a shaping concern. Problems were soon encountered with detailed planning and it was in part Professor Stretton’s influence which induced the Academic Planning Board to leave it to a nucleus of the yet-to-be appointed academic staff to plan the role and scope of the schools in the humanities and social sciences.

The Planning Board agreed to recommend the establishment of the Schools of Humanities, Social Sciences, Physical Sciences and Biological Sciences, with several disciplines in each. Following the pragmatic Stretton solution to planning difficulties, decisions regarding further disciplines could be postponed until the appointment of the foundation academic staff. Among the areas suggested for future development, but without any firm commitment, were East Asian studies, agriculture, earth sciences, law, commerce, education and, more unusually, ‘world conditions a generation hence’. Medicine and engineering were also foreshadowed, as was a proposal for an ‘Institute of Tertiary Education’ which was particularly promoted by Sir Macfarlane Burnet. His advocacy was based on two major premises: that La Trobe would be permanently subordinate to the two existing universities if it sought to excel only in the areas already established there and that a major way in which universities were letting down the community was by their failure to provide an adequate number of secondary teachers, particularly in science ‘and, perhaps equally important, their failure in the science faculties to influence the almost universal feeling amongst their graduates that a career in full-time research is more desirable than an academic post with opportunities for tertiary (and quaternary) teaching’. Such issues, it was hoped, the projected Institute of Tertiary Education would address.

But that project was for the future. Late in 1965, with the arrival of the first Vice-Chancellor and the appointment of the first foundation professors, planning gave way to implementation. The architects had given physical expression to the shared hopes for an integrated campus and easy movement of students by planning the academic buildings as a closely grouped series of connected blocks, mostly three or four storeys high, converging on a hub of common facilities, dominated by the Library as focal point for the whole academic community. The individual appointees to the foundation chairs began by joint discussions to shape their shared aspirations, and the detailed forms of the first year offerings within each school took shape. The advertisement for foundation professors had specified the basic disciplines at the broadest level without, for example, seeking to define which modern European language or what areas of sociology were preferred, leaving such matters to be settled by the nature of the applications which were made. Some of the professors, however, felt that although at their appointment they had been promised a free hand in shaping the academic offerings of their schools and making academic appointments for the first three or four years, in practice many of their options had been pre-empted before they actually took up their positions.

On the other hand, Professor Donald Whitehead, one of the two foundation professors of Economics, recalled an exciting period when discussions with Jean and Allan Martin (foundation chairs of Sociology and History respectively) helped to define the basic teaching processes for the arts-based parts of the University. To counter the system of large, impersonal seminars masquerading as tutorials that several academics believed had taken over in the existing Australian universities, a stress on tutorials based on groups of six was decided on at the first joint meeting of humanities and social science professors. Six seemed a pedagogically sound number, large enough to stretch the good students and small enough to keep all the students in dialogue with their tutor. From this, other decisions followed. If students were to be extended in their weekly tutorials in the ways envisaged, then three units a year would be as much as they could manage, and in those courses the number of lectures was likely to be reduced from the prevailing norm, as part of a move to shift the focus of the University from an academic delivering knowledge to the student reading widely, and then formulating and defending an argument.
About tutorials there was little dispute, but about the nature of the foundation schools and what they represented there was much more. From the start there was disagreement about whether the schools were there to facilitate an eclectic crossdisciplinary study, viewing each unit of study as a 'separate miracle', or whether each school should aim to develop a specific ethos, largely through carefully-devised, close interrelationships over a rather narrow field of study. There was also disagreement about the proper place of each discipline within the schools. Although the initial letters of appointment to the foundation professors offered appointments to a chair in their discipline, the chair was within a specified school in lieu of the more usual departmental organisation. The early stress on the place of the deans of each school has already been indicated, but there were professors who from the start were anxious to establish their own departments and to establish as much disciplinary autonomy as possible — in other words to make La Trobe as much like other Australian universities as could be achieved.

Despite such tensions throughout 1966, most of the academics already appointed worked within the framework of the schools as generally delineated in the introductory pamphlets issued about the University. The pamphlet of July 1966, for example, announced the identifying features of each school. The School of Humanities was to offer five major disciplines, English, History, Philosophy, French and Spanish, with a 'useful degree of integration between these disciplines' being provided by a common compulsory unit in first year and some interrelated areas or periods in units taken in first and later years. Similarly, the School of Social Sciences declared that, for the five disciplines in that School, Economics, History, Philosophy, Politics and Sociology, one of the aims would be 'to show, throughout the whole period of study, the ways in which the various Social Sciences complement one another'. The School of Physical Sciences announced that it would embrace Chemistry, Mathematics and Physics and that for the first two years students would be allowed to study certain approved courses from other Schools. The new School of Biological Sciences presented an interdisciplinary course, integrating traditional studies in Botany and Zoology, 'together with recent developments'. At the same time, the liberalised entrance requirements for the following year's first intake of undergraduates were announced; in general they were the standard VUSEB requirements but with no specific prerequisites except for matriculation French for those wishing to study French.

The academic organisation of the University outlined in the July pamphlet was confirmed at a press conference held in October 1966. Although it was only some four months before the first students were due to enrol, the Vice-Chancellor's introduction included a plea to the assembled media representatives to help make more generally known that La Trobe was not at 'Morwell or Yallourn, but at Bundoora, some eight miles north of Melbourne'. The four professors speaking on behalf of their four Schools all paid special attention not only to what was to be taught but also to how it would be taught. Professor Parsons reiterated a strong commitment by his school to teaching Biology as an integrated entity, at least in the early years of study. He also stressed that 'discussions and contact between staff and students will be encouraged. In particular, practical classes will be places where students will discover things for themselves'. The commitment of the School of Physical Sciences as expressed by Professor Topsom, was somewhat different. Greater attention to discipline-based learning, but a similar teaching impulse was announced, with Physical Science students having, as well as the customary lectures and laboratory periods, one tutorial period a week in each subject. Professor Whitehead announced the School of Social Science's plans for a 'rather wider range of Social Sciences than are usually contained in these faculties but without sacrificing the advantages of a well-integrated course structure'. He confirmed the University's widespread concern to create closer contact between staff and students, and focused on the role of the smaller tutorial group as the key to the effort to make the student's first year 'more of a spring board and less of a hurdle'. The School of Humanities representative, Professor Forsyth, explained his School's strategies for integrating studies and for individualising contact with students as far as
possible. The means for this included not only small tutorial groups — a standard six or seven students was anticipated — but a common first year course, Humanities I, which was intended to offer each Humanities student individual tutorials on books described as ‘milestones in the development of western thought’. Social Sciences IA was established to serve a comparable purpose in that School.

In March 1967, La Trobe University began teaching its first undergraduate students. The concept of school-based teaching was already under attack from those people and forces that found the traditional discipline-based system much more acceptable. Even among the foundation professors there was often some ambivalence about their commitment to the school system. Philosophy was perhaps the most interdisciplinary of all the founding disciplines, since from the start it taught students from all schools and was a member of two, but its departmental focus took form very early. History collaborated closely with Sociology to promote an interdisciplinary study of Latin America, intended to evolve into a full set of courses in Latin American Studies, but collaboration never did rule out separate departmental organisation as well. More than one founding professor who worked hard for truly integrated undergraduate courses has pointed out that the moment issues of funding for postgraduate students arose, the interdisciplinary impulse disappeared. There, the research-based status of each discipline was at stake. Fully-integrated courses within a school required of each discipline a series of self-denying ordinances which were increasingly hard to maintain as new staff were appointed for their academic qualifications, regardless of their commitment to principles of a school system which had never been completely formulated. As several founding professors complained, students were enrolled in such numbers and staff appointed so rapidly, that there was no time for induction into those principles which were intended to make La Trobe different, or working through the strenuous planning process that Professor Stretton had looked for. This encouraged the drift back to the conventional discipline-based standards of international traditions of scholarship and research. Only a minority of students — and in some schools a very small minority — showed much interest in innovative, paradigm-breaking new courses. Above all, from an early stage there were severe staffing and funding constraints, and problems were raised about the long-term economy and practicality of, for example, continuing the early practice of sharing facilities between physics, chemistry and mathematics. The School of Biological Sciences exemplified many of the problems inherent in the school system. Strongly committed to the concept initially, the School felt compelled to departmentalise in 1968 for several reasons. One was political, for while it was constituted as an integrated whole, the School generally was regarded by the University as little more than a department in the hierarchy of power bases. Students themselves resisted the integrated studies, showing a strong preference for a specialised degree based upon one or two disciplines, a preference which reflected many employer expectations. Finally the staff themselves tended to resist an integrated curriculum beyond the first year.

Nevertheless, the collapse of the founding plans for school-based studies has not proved complete. Indeed, there are many and varied legacies of the school system which have left their mark on undergraduate teaching at La Trobe over the length of its history, and left an impressive range of integrated courses. Although, at first glance, only the administrative shell of the academically-inspired schools has remained in most cases, some of the initial philosophy has survived and been adapted, often by staff appointed well after the fragmentation into discipline-based departments had begun. The case of Professor Bob Reid, foundation professor of Agriculture, is an impressive example of the appeal of integrated studies. Disregarding the thrust of the advertisement for the La Trobe post which anticipated the need for future specialist graduates, he based his application in terms of a strong commitment to a broad, integrated course in which the interrelationships between climate, soils, plants, animals and economics, and their dependence on a sound basis of primary sciences — chemistry, physics and mathematics — was stressed. After his successful application, he appointed other staff in sympathy with his convictions from the School’s foundation in 1968. Late in the 1970s, when there were three professors in the School of Agriculture and Reid’s retirement was
imminent, the School debated a proposal to separate into three departments. It was finally decided that this fragmentation of the School would disrupt the teaching and research arrangements and reduce the flexibility for future development, especially in a time of limited finances and resources. The proposal was rejected. Professor Cherry would have been pleased.

Similar points can be made about developments following the appointment of Professor Alan White in 1971 to establish the Department of Geology in the School of Physical Sciences. He brought with him a commitment to teaching and to breadth in education which led him to resist suggestions for a third year based entirely in the Geology Department, despite the budgetary advantages that would have brought. The initial commitment of the School of Biological Sciences to integrated studies can still be seen in the first-year course provided for its students, despite the considerable increase in the number of departments within that School. Mathematics which like Philosophy has always served students in all schools, joined Computer Science and Statistics to become the School of Mathematical and Information Sciences in 1985. From that base are offered a series of joint degrees combining mathematics with accounting, electronic engineering, economics, logic, linguistics, philosophy, physics and psychology as well as the more conventional courses which also allow for considerable flexibility and a range of combinations across the schools. The schools may have become much more aggregations of discipline-based departments than La Trobe's founders had intended, but they have also provided the umbrellas under which academic expansion and innovation has been able to take place.

After the very rapid expansion of the tertiary education sector in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, extraordinary growth in student numbers and the introduction of new disciplines was projected, all premised upon continuing substantial funding. The reality proved quite otherwise, with first a much slower increase in funding and then the onset of a 'steady state' in funding. As early as 1968 the School of Physical Sciences was predicting that, unless finances improved, the new undergraduate practical courses would be inadequate and the development of research crippled. Reduced funding continued to be a significant problem through much of the 1970s and in 1981 the University Council received a report detailing the effects at La Trobe of reduced federal funding. One major problem identified was an acute shortage of space for the new developments which were taking place. In the Schools of Biological and Physical Sciences, new Departments of Microbiology, Communications Engineering and Computer Science, often under-resourced, forced themselves into space reluctantly surrendered by established departments which thereby lost laboratory space and teaching rooms. The problems for members of the Music Department established in 1975 within the School of Humanities, proved particularly acute. Only in 1988 were they able to move into purpose-built rooms, escaping from the scattered, inadequate and unsuitable areas they had previously occupied, where their activities inevitably led to numerous complaints from their quieter neighbours. The proximity to some members of the Philosophy Department was particularly difficult for all involved.

Despite such problems, there were many new disciplines established, and occasionally new Schools. The School of Economics emerged as a separate identity from the School of Social Sciences in 1977 and expanded particularly its accounting courses. The School of Education founded in 1970 may not have been addressed to the specific ambitions of Sir MacFarlane Burnet, but it was, in general, in accordance with the purposes of the founders. In its conception it was the most interdisciplinary School in the University — and in practice it has remained truly interdisciplinary. In place of the discipline-based departments of the conventional educational faculties, it is divided into problem-focused centres. The effect is that within each centre there are people from a range of disciplines united by a common concern, but sharing interests also with members of other centres. Consequently there is also interaction and communication between centres to an unusual degree. The centres have also shown a flexibility in responding to shifting definitions of their 'problem' area. For example, the Centre for Urban Studies began with a marked sociological slant, but has moved through an increasing recogni-
tion of the issues of teaching migrant children to a concern with the wider issues of language in education. It accordingly has acquired more staff with a background in languages. Perhaps as a consequence of so much interdisciplinary contact, the School has developed a strongly professional commitment both to improving the practice of education and to offering courses which combine the theory and practice of education very closely. Thus, a feature of its BEd and Masters courses is the Task Force option, which involves identifying the aims of a particular project within a cluster of schools, conducting the research to define the objectives of the intervention, conducting the intervention and then evaluating and writing up the whole program. There have been a number of important innovations within the School, which was the first at La Trobe, for example, to establish a Masters degree by coursework. The BEd in Counselling is another important and significant initiative undertaken by this School.

Although welcomed as a new discipline in 1972, both by staff and by students, Psychology found it most satisfactory to establish its own school — Behavioural Sciences, later to be joined by Social Work. Teaching in the School is notable for its incorporation of a wide range of other disciplines — sociology, genetics and zoology, statistics, economics, computer science, legal studies, physiology and nutrition — and for other innovations. These include: the abolition of annual examinations and the early introduction of continuous assessment, the sequencing of the course in terms of content rather than difficulty, and the integrated treatment of behaviour from many concurrent viewpoints (social, developmental, biological, abnormal, differential) rather than separately and sequentially. But the symbiotic relationship between interdisciplinary studies and established disciplines has probably been most fully exemplified in the arts-based schools. Under the aegis of Inter Disciplinary Studies, both Drama and Religious Studies were supported until the demonstrable demand for their courses enabled their separate identities to be established, and many other interdisciplinary courses are still supported that way. The aspirations of the founders are also still reflected in a whole range of areas of study, essentially interdisciplinary in outcome, though their component parts are often taught as discipline-based courses within specific departments. There are, among others, Aboriginal studies, North American studies, Australian studies, Latin American studies, Pacific studies, revolutionary studies, peace studies and — most recently — women's studies as well as several others. In many ways then, the original notion of studies integrated beyond the conventional discipline boundaries which the Schools were established to express, continues to be a shaping force in undergraduate and, to a lesser extent, postgraduate studies at La Trobe.

A number of criticisms of the school structure, however, have been expressed. One of the major and most serious consequences has been actual restrictions on the possibilities students are offered to study courses outside their own school. Such restrictions vary from school to school and, it could well be argued, are consistent with the ambitions of those who wished to define distinctive schools each with their own particular ethos. With the demise of such peculiarly school-based subjects as Humanities I and Social Sciences I A, designed to serve a comparable purpose, the case for any such distinctive ethos became weaker. The problem that remains is that, with degree structures varying from school to school, equality of course is difficult to address. At the time of writing there is a fresh initiative afoot to standardise the degree structure across the university, as a first step to encourage further widening of studies between schools, but any change is unlikely to come rapidly.

Another impulse which distinguished La Trobe in its founding statements from other universities, apart from the extent of the commitment to integrated and interdisciplinary studies, was its stress on the University as a teaching institution. This is most usefully discussed under two heads: the recognition of the special needs of La Trobe's student populations and the concerns to address them on one hand, and the provision of help for academics to develop and enhance their teaching skills on the other. This discussion will address the latter first.

In terms of formal developments, the record of the provision of teaching advisory assistance at La Trobe is a sorry one. Various proposals for training-in-teaching, or assistance with
teaching have been recurrently discussed since at least 1968. Nevertheless, at the beginning of 1988 the only unit for the development of teaching skills within the University was one which had been developed at Lincoln Institute prior to the amalgamation. A unit with a very high reputation, it has been fully occupied servicing the Lincoln School of Health Sciences, although discussions have also begun in 1988 as to the future relationship between that unit and the Bundoora campus. So, as yet, the University founded with an unusually strong commitment to its teaching function has not yet developed a staffed scheme for assistance with academic teaching skills. But to suggest that the absence of such a unit demonstrates lack of commitment by La Trobe academics to their teaching responsibilities would be misleading. A considerable number of academics have always agreed that such a facility would have many advantages. In one university-wide survey, some forty-four per cent of all academic staff answered a questionnaire on the issue. Of those, some ninety-four per cent declared they would be interested in seeking assistance with their own teaching. But despite a series of working parties, committees and consultative groups, no such proposal has yet been put into effect. In 1978, a member of one such committee remarked that for any such proposal to succeed it would need to devise ways to improve teaching skills without threatening anyone or spending any money. Events have shown the wisdom of that view.

The most usual resistance to the creation of a teaching skills unit over the years has indeed been framed in terms of cost, but there has also been widespread doubt about such a central unit’s capacity to comprehend the particular needs of each discipline — a view often expressed in terms of university teaching being an ‘apprenticeship’, by which senior academics should properly induct their juniors into the craft. Repeatedly the point has been made in terms used by one board of studies, that ‘the sort of assistance available from a specialist educational unit would be of less value than the advice and guidance of those within the discipline or related disciplines’. And it is certainly true that if one reviews the teaching history of La Trobe, there is an impressive history of teaching seminars and discussion groups being formed within the various schools, and a range of teaching innovations being set in place. The School of Agriculture, for example, introduced peer-group teaching, in which a staff member or external expert (the ‘monitor’) set the direction of the course and guided the work and discussion of participating students, who found their own way through a topic, presented their findings to the class, and were assessed by their peers. The Physics Department adopted a radical American experiment for its first-year laboratory course, involving extensive use of electronics to illuminate a variety of physical phenomena and throughout the University there have been many experiments to move away from the conventional examination system. Departments in both Humanities and Social Sciences have experimented with a range of teaching and examining techniques.

But always there have been anxieties, especially when a teaching assistance unit has been discussed, about the costs to be incurred through a period when both teaching staff and teaching facilities have been reduced as a direct result of the funding reductions of the 1970s and 1980s. In the science schools, teaching equipment as well as research equipment was becoming obsolete and unreliable, and funding constraints also led to the reduction of course options in all the science-based schools, particularly at third and fourth year (honours) levels. In the classrooms themselves there were fewer technicians in the schools that employed them, and fewer tutorial staff across the whole University. In all parts of the University, the founding principle of small tutorial classes was undermined, not because the academics disliked them but because changing staff-student ratios made the pedagogic luxury of concentrated teaching in small groups no longer possible. In the arts-based schools, funding cuts led to the virtual disappearance of tutorial assistance staff in many departments.

As financial cuts imposed ever larger tutorial groups, and as the composition of the student body changed, there were also many academics who became increasingly dissatisfied with the pedagogic success, in the changing circumstances, of the tutorials on which the founders of La Trobe had pinned such hopes. The arts-based schools, in particular, have seen
much experimentation with various forms of workshops, based on much larger groups of students working on shared problems for much longer periods — up to three hours, in lieu of the original standard one-hour tutorial. Despite the range of principles and models which underlay the move to workshops, the stress on forms of written work and the standards expected have remained very much the same, although there have also been some experiments within the School of Humanities in allowing students to opt for ungraded passes. There was some hostility to this, identifying non-graded passes with collapse of academic standards. They have now generally lapsed, but much less for reasons of anxieties about maintaining academic standards than because the most able students were being disadvantaged, since scholarship granting committees require grades of the conventional sort. It also has proved to be true that most students prefer to be graded. A more enduring legacy from the experimentation of the early seventies has been the workshops themselves, which have in various ways sought to promote discussion between students without the necessary intervention of the tutor at every stage, and without relying on the most articulate, the most confident students to carry the group.

The importance of academic teaching within the University received added recognition from the Academic Board decision in July 1983 that for promotion to senior lecturer 'equal weight should be given to teaching and research'. Subsequently there was renewed activity by those concerned to provide expert teaching advice to academics now required to demonstrate a greater level of teaching competence, but problems of evaluation have always haunted such discussions, and continue to do so. There are those who argue that students are unreliable judges of the quality of the teaching they receive, and that in any evaluation a time-lapse factor needs to be built in to allow any short-term 'popularity' factor to be dissipated. Peer assessment was more generally commended, but not in any very systematic way. Despite such unease continuing, and despite always the resistance on the grounds of cost, in December 1985 it was decided there was enough support for a new proposal for a Learning and Teaching unit to be presented to Academic Board. There it was agreed, in May 1986, to defer further consideration of the proposal until a decision had been taken, in principle, on a merger with Lincoln Institute. The discussions indicated at the beginning of this section were resumed in June 1988.

Much thought had been given to the presentation and integration of studies for first year students, and some consideration given to the desired characteristics and likely career paths for the graduates of at least some Schools. Nevertheless, the founders seem to have expected Anglo-Saxon, middle-class students, perhaps of an antipodean Oxbridge model, rather than to have anticipated the diversity of background and preparation of those who actually would enrol. When solutions to those unanticipated student difficulties, particularly with writing academic English, were looked for, examples of possible strategies were already in place at the School of General Studies at the ANU, at Monash, and under discussion at Adelaide University. At the ANU, by 1976, there was a unit of five people to address similar problems among perhaps fifteen per cent of the students of the School of General Studies. But the recollection of one emeritus professor of the student who, when faced with her first Humanities I individual tutorial simply burst into tears, illustrates what a profoundly alien environment many students found the University to be. Some professors in the early years — Allan Martin in the History Department was a case in point — certainly looked for staff who included among their qualifications a capacity to teach students who, although clever, were likely to be culturally deprived and ill at ease in the University milieu.

By 1974 the University's Advisory Committee on Academic Developments was reflecting a widespread concern about the level of achievement shown by many students in writing academically desirable English. The Language Centre had already been established in 1974, initially on a two-year experimental basis, but its brief was primarily to provide courses of instruction in languages for members and departments of the University. Some courses included instruction in English as a second language for students and staff members who had a native language other than English. The initial ACAD scheme for all students was a university-
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wide 'Essay Writing Assistance Unit' which was approved in principle but deferred in implementation until 1977 'subject to funds being then available'. The proponents of the scheme pointed out that not only was there general agreement that many students had significant problems with written expression, but also that, with the move in many parts of the University away from the traditional 'do or die' examinations to continuous assessment, the problem would increase in significance. Responses from various School boards showed the usual mix: the recognition that there was a problem and that it needed addressing; the sense that there already existed the appropriate personnel to do it — the Language Centre, the Counselling Service and academics doing their job properly; the problems of cost 'in times of stringent financial conditions'.

By mid-1976 it was clear that a decentralised approach was being adopted to solving the problem. The Language Centre ran some courses, particularly for the School of Physical Sciences, the Counselling Service ran some courses — and has always continued to do so for students across the University — but a school-based approach was also emerging. The first Adviser in the Use of English — initially called a 'Lecturer in the Use of English' until he himself pointed out what a misdescription of his role that was — took up his appointment in the School of Humanities in April 1977. That he was quickly involved in giving assistance not only to the customary and conventional kinds of students but also to mature age students and early leavers illustrates how widespread were the needs for such assistance with essay writing and the formal demands of University work, so different from the demands that newly enrolled students had previously faced. It has been suggested that academics effectively require their students to acquire another dialect; many students seemed to think so. The Humanities appointment was intended partly as a pilot model for the rest of the University, although the appointment was also, from the start, intended as a permanent one. In the same year, additional funds were made available to the Language Centre to provide more assistance to foreign students for whom English was a second language. The benefits of such courses as these, and the acceptance of the effectiveness of the school-based positions, was illustrated by the first appointment to a comparable position in the School of Social Sciences. By 1984 Advisers in the Use of English had also been appointed to the Science Schools and to Economics, though the Language Centre also continued to give assistance especially to students from those areas. The advisers now covering all schools serve the specific discipline-based needs of students from the various areas. They co-operate closely among themselves, with the Language Centre, and with their colleagues in the Counselling Service. Despite the particular diversity of age, experience and cultural backgrounds of the students at La Trobe, many of the problems identified and addressed by these advisers are widespread throughout the Australian tertiary student population.

This has long been recognised by the provision of introductory courses for newly-enrolled students. There have also been some innovative new processes devised for addressing the problems almost before they are encountered, not to forestall them (which would require a miracle) but the better to prepare students for them. Examples might be offered from the programs devised by what is now the Language and Academic Skills Unit in the School of Social Sciences. Since 1985 it has received funding from a CTEC Equity grant to provide introductory courses for first-year students. Initially it was a course offered to those deemed to be most 'at risk' in the academic context of the school's new intake; experience led to its being widened to be available to all new enrolments in the school, including those formally enrolled in Humanities but with a substantial Social Sciences component to their degree. Such schemes are still at the experimental stage, but early results suggest that the performance of students who completed that course has been markedly improved. Interesting implications for the complexity of the concept of educational disadvantage as experienced by many students prior to their admission are also being worked through. Since 1985 less well-prepared students entering the science schools have also been helped by special bridging courses funded by the CTEC Participation and Equity Program, and other sources. All advisers also offer a great deal of individual assistance, and public classes in essay preparation and essay structure are avail-
able at intervals throughout the year. Interestingly, students actively seeking assistance represent all years of the undergraduate degree, including the honours year and all levels of achievement. They also represent all categories of students, with mature age students often drawing particularly heavily on these sources early in their studies. All this is in no way peculiar to La Trobe. As already indicated two universities at least provided such assistance before this one did, and such language skills assistance schemes are now commonplace in most tertiary institutions — but it is an area where La Trobe has been in the forefront of recognising a new need among students and seeking to provide for it comprehensively. La Trobe was also a leader in opening its doors — or allowing some schools to open their doors — to new categories of students. Perhaps one of the most innovative — and certainly one of the most rewarding — was in admitting students who had not formally qualified for university entrance. Part of the impulse for this initiative came from Professor Allan Martin, who had seen similar schemes in operation in the United Kingdom. A proposal to admit unqualified students was exactly the kind of proposition to be taken by some of the more conservative elements as fulfilment of their direct predictions that the move to institutional difference could only lead to a serious decline in academic standards. In spite of such misgivings, the School of Humanities was permitted to enrol an experimental group of unmatriculated students in 1972. This was the start of the Early Leavers Scheme which is more fully discussed elsewhere but is mentioned here as an eminently successful example of the University being prepared to consider admission for possible students who had never even attempted the formal entrance requirement — often, it eventuated, for reasons of social and economic disadvantage. The initial pilot group was limited to twenty and their results subjected to careful scrutiny. They were so impressive that in 1973 the scheme was expanded, and in 1975 a similar scheme was introduced in the School of Social Sciences and a comparable 'special entry scheme' in the School of Physical Sciences. That category is now a normal subgroup for students in most schools, and many academics would argue that many of their most rewarding and successful students have been admitted under that scheme. Its success has made it easier, in subsequent years, to introduce other experiments which departed from the rigidities of the early admission system. The results have helped in the establishment of the diversity of students which makes La Trobe such an interesting University in which to teach — and such a challenge.

In conclusion: for the first year or two of its existence, the student intake at La Trobe was so small that a high proportion of admitted students had listed this University as their first preference. Among them were some very high quality students who were very positively attracted to La Trobe's assertion of difference, as the founders had hoped they would be. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that many able students were hesitant about enrolling at such a different university for fear of encountering employer resistance in later years, so the assertion of difference probably cut both ways. As the number of students expanded, the proportion of first preference applicants dropped but this was compensated to some extent by the experiments with admission policy in the 1970s and 1980s. The proportion of students coming to La Trobe as the institution of their first preference in recent years has increased steadily, though the proportion of such enrolments varies markedly from School to School. The student body at La Trobe in the 1980s has been uncharacteristically diverse for an Australian university: the substantial representation of female students, students from migrant backgrounds, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds has given it a student body more representative of the composition of Victorian society itself than of the standard university student profile. Perhaps, after all, at least in part through the care taken with its teaching, La Trobe has gone some way to meeting that other founding objective, 'to serve the community and in particular the citizens of Victoria'.

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