The First Decade
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Laying the foundation
The passing of the La Trobe University Act 1964 by the government of Victoria, was the formal beginning of the University's history. The University was officially opened on 8 March 1967 by the Premier of Victoria after the installation of the Chancellor by the Governor in his capacity as Visitor. In spite of some early uncertainty about the weather, the sun finally emerged and the ceremony took place in the open air, its solemnity relieved only by the academic procession slowly moving in full regalia to the dais to the strains of 'Now Your Days of Philandering Are Over', played by the Southern Command Band.

The Act of course did little to indicate the great contribution already made by members of the Third University (Promotion) Committee, whose recommendations became the guidelines for the drafting of the Act, and who formed the nucleus of the Interim Council which met for the first time on 22 December 1964, less than two weeks after the passing of the Act. My association with La Trobe began on 26 April 1965, when I was invited to join in the task of its development. It ended in 1976 when I retired as a result of the passing of the years. For the period of about a dozen years I was an eye witness of most things that took place and can relate my experiences of that exciting stage of development. What came before and after is for others to describe, but I hope I can be forgiven for saying a few words about the environment I entered in 1965 and how it came to be.

I quickly became aware of the conclusions reached by the Promotion Committee, the Interim Council and the Academic Planning Board, and it is dear that future generations will have cause for gratitude to those bodies for their wisdom and forethought. Without in any way disparaging their individual efforts, it is timely for me to pay a special tribute to Mr J.R.A. (later Sir Archibald) Glenn who, after discussions with the Premier of Victoria, became the driving force in establishing first the Promotion Committee, then the Interim Council and finally the Council, which elected him the first Chancellor. His continued interest and sound advice were of inestimable value to those of us entrusted with the continued operation of the new University. Mr B.J. (later Sir Bernard) Callinan was elected the first Deputy Chancellor and for many years gave valuable service in that capacity and as chairman of the Building Committee.

From experience of universities on three continents I had formed views regarding their structure and administration. At the time of my appointment I was gratified to discover that these views accorded well with those of the Interim Council. Moreover, I found that an admirable site had been chosen and excellent arrangements made for its landscaping. From early discussions I had with the planning architect, Mr Roy Simpson, it was clear that his views on its development were consistent in all important respects with my own. In particular I was convinced that the 'heart' of the university should be the library, that access to it from all academic buildings should be easy and that student residences should be situated close to the academic buildings. These views conformed with the concentric plan envisaged by Roy Simpson, and the overall physical plan was readily approved by the Interim Council.
Building La Trobe University

The Interim Council, aware of the time needed to develop an adequate library, had given priority to appointing a Chief Librarian. Dietrich Borchardt was chosen and became the first person to take up duty at the University. The wisdom of this choice became apparent very soon and the Library flourished under his leadership.

So far as the academic structure was concerned, I held strong views on the dual role of a Vice-Chancellor. Apart from his duty to provide academic leadership, he is responsible for maintaining the financial and administrative services which enable the academic work to thrive. Although the latter function, including the seeking of funds and overall supervision of their application, requires constant attention, I have always firmly believed that the prime duty of a Vice-Chancellor is to provide leadership and encouragement to the academic staff. In particular, he should present and support the views of the academic body to the governing body. This can be done most effectively if he is the chairman of the senior academic body. Since the Australian universities operate as bicameral organisations the Vice-Chancellor, as a member of the governing body, is equally in a position to interpret its decisions or opinions to the academic body. Accordingly, I made my opinion clear to the Interim Council, which accepted it and, although not specifically required by the Act, the Vice-Chancellor of La Trobe has been ab initio the chairman of the Academic Board.

For two years after the passing of the Act the University occupied rented quarters in St Kilda Road, an address which had acquired considerable distinction as the former residence of a great Australian, Sir David Rivett, and later as the headquarters of the Australian Universities Commission. This was a fitting locale for the birth and early development of the University. After we moved to the present site at Bundoora, our former quarters became a massage parlour.

The two years in temporary accommodation were, for many of us, a most exciting period. By the beginning of 1967 the planning and construction of the first two buildings, the Library and Glenn College, were completed, the former to do temporary extra duty as a science laboratory and the latter as office space for academic and administrative staff.

The move from St Kilda Road to Bundoora brought a dramatic change in working conditions. Urban comfort gave way to the noise of earth-moving equipment and building operations, accompanied by dust during the hot, dry summers and slippery, adhesive mud in the winter, once forcing the Chancellor to abandon his car in mid-campus. Looking back to those days, from the comfort of the present buildings and surroundings, those of us who took part in the transition recall with pleasure the sense of community and of achievement that came to us through working together in the comparative hardship of the early years.

In 1965 the University not only had no permanent home but also faced the prospect of setting up an administrative structure to deal efficiently and accurately with such matters as building contracts and other financial transactions, secondary legislation, terms and conditions of staff appointments, the registration of students and the recording of their progress. On 1 May 1965, Mr Frank Barnes took up duty as Executive Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor and six months later was appointed Business Manager. On 1 April 1966, Major General T.S. Taylor commenced duty as Registrar.

Both Frank Barnes and Tim Taylor embarked on their duties with energy and imagination. It is in a great measure due to their efforts and those of the staff appointed to assist them that the initial group of academic staff was able to concentrate on courses of study to be implemented in 1967 and maintain considerable research activity using facilities generously provided by Melbourne and Monash Universities, CSIRO, and other organisations. A valuable addition to the team was Donne Sherwin with her wide knowledge of Commonwealth universities.

Four professors, Alan Wardrop, Brian Ellis, Ron Topsom, and Don Whitehead, were appointed as the Deans of the four Schools for the first year of student intake.

During the two year gestation period in St Kilda Road, the Interim Council continued to meet regularly and most of its members served actively on its various committees including
The First Decade

those dealing with buildings, finance, legislation, colleges, and housing. Meanwhile the 
Academic Planning Board comprising initially a group of professors from Melbourne, Mon­
as, and Adelaide Universities, was augmented by the addition of increasing numbers of La 
Trobe staff, moving towards its eventual replacement by the Academic Board constituted 
under the Act.

The small band of ‘early birds’ had an exacting but satisfying task and most of their 
achievements are recorded in the formal minutes of various committees. Two of them made 
valuable contributions which have not been similarly recorded. One is Frank Saul, who led a 
hardworking team in converting what was an almost treeless dairy farm into a garden unver­
y. The other is Pat Vondrejc who, with her band of telephone operators, are always so 
courteous and helpful that many visitors have commented on the friendliness of their first 
contact with La Trobe.

By the time the University accepted its first students, the pattern of planned academic and 
social development had been decided and was summarised in the inaugural lecture which I 
delivered on 20 March 1967. I propose to quote in this article passages relating to some of the 
plans outlined in that lecture and to examine the extent to which they matured during the first 
decade.

In that time La Trobe underwent a rate of growth almost unprecedented in Australian 
universities. The immediate demands for establishing courses and providing the necessary 
support for them, together with the difficulty of securing any assurance of funds beyond the 
next few years, reduced long term planning to little more than speculation:

With the exception of agreed fundamental concepts, plans for development should be 
sufficient only to establish an initial direction of activities and to enable the academic and 
physical growth of the University to be adjusted from time to time to the needs of a 
changing world.1

During the 1950s the Australian universities, faced with vastly increased enrolments, had 
lived precariously since they depended for their continued existence mainly on the support of 
state governments and, to some extent, the receipt of tuition fees from students. The former 
varied from state to state, while the latter demanded financial sacrifices from individuals, or 
even prevented them from enrolling in a university. This problem was partly alleviated by the 
award of exhibitions and bursaries, but this made inroads on the limited funds available. Some 
support from the federal government and from commercial and industrial institutions enabled 
research to be carried on, but in general this was little more than a drop in the ocean.

The decision in 1959 by the federal government to establish the Australian Universities 
Commission (AUQ) gave promise of a far better future, especially as it involved the entry of 
the Commonwealth into university financing, hitherto regarded as a state responsibility. One 
result was the expansion of existing universities and the formation of new ones. Funds on a 
reasonable scale became available to meet the growing demand for university places, for 
providing commensurate academic and support staff and for the design and construction of 
buildings and equipment. La Trobe University came into existence during this period of ap­
parent prosperity and was initially able to carry out its program of expansion, although not 
entirely in the directions originally envisaged. From the point of view of the universities, the 
arrival on the scene of the Commission was a welcome change and the Commission carried 
out its formidable task with great thoroughness. In doing so, it found itself in the unenviable 
position of assessing the priorities of requests from a dozen or more institutions all competing 
for what were, and always will be, insufficient funds to satisfy all of them. To do this it had to 
find formulae for the assessment of teaching loads, building costs and various other aspects of 
a university’s operation. This led inevitably to the accretion of power in the hands of the 
Commission, since the freedom of a university to determine its academic priorities could now 
be heavily influenced by that external body. While some may disagree, it is my opinion that, at 
least during my association with La Trobe, any interference by the Commission with our 
academic development was minimal and based on a reasonable assessment of our needs.

33
My retirement in 1976 coincided approximately with the federal government’s decision to halt the rapid growth of university facilities which had taken place over the previous decade. The honeymoon was over and it is not for me to say how well the universities have reacted to the more static conditions which followed except to observe, as an outsider, that they appeared to adapt admirably to the change in tempo.

**Academic planning**

It was recognised early that the basic teaching and research unit of the University should be the department involved in an individual discipline such, for example, as history, mathematics or economics. To ensure a reasonable co-ordination between the various disciplines, a number of Schools were established, the initial groupings being humanities and the social, physical and biological sciences. This differed from the normal Australian pattern of faculties such as Arts and Science which are, *inter alia*, responsible for determining the criteria for the award of a degree in their own areas of competence. The division into Schools appeared to provide more flexibility in arranging courses of study to meet individual needs. In particular, the expansion of knowledge and the trend towards specialisation during the twentieth century have emphasised the need to provide an even broader range of offerings without the sacrifice of depth. Scientists should experience exposure to the social implications of their efforts; archaeologists need an understanding of the earth sciences, and so on. Although this is not easy to achieve in the few years of a normal course, it was felt that the schools would at least provide more flexibility than more rigid faculty requirements.

It was recognised, of course, that in the early years the academic butter should not be spread too thin and many subjects normally covered in a university curriculum had to await the full development of others. There was considerable discussion of the teaching of languages in view of Australia’s changing role in the international theatre. Consideration was given to the teaching of Asian languages, with particular reference to South East Asia, but it was found that other universities already provided excellent courses in them. Eventually it was decided to concentrate on romance languages. Other disciplines, which were to wait some time for their introduction, included psychology, the earth sciences, music and the history of art. Steps were taken to establish a chair in geography and proceeded so far as the offer of an appointment, but (strangely for such a discipline) this project lost its way and disappeared into the jungle of superannuation regulations.

It was, at the beginning, our intention to establish a firm basis of studies in the humanities and the social, physical and biological sciences and then extend our activities into ‘professional’ areas such as law, medicine, engineering, agriculture and education, all of which would rest on a firm base of the liberal arts or science or both. I was approached from time to time, as were some of my colleagues, by prominent members of these professions, urging that we should proceed to establish one or other of the professional schools during the honeymoon period of academic expansion. We did, indeed, decide to set up Schools of Agriculture and Education, in both cases with the support of the Universities Commission. As I stated in my inaugural lecture in 1967:

> It is lamentable but true that many universities feel bound to exclude from their attention the study of any discipline which appears to have direct practical significance. This is a form of intellectual snobbery which brings little credit to the university and little benefit to the community. There is no inherent reason why a liberal education should be a useless education. The idea of providing education as a step towards professional or other occupations is not a product of modern technology. It existed long before the technological advances of the nineteenth century demonstrated the connection between education and material progress.

They have illuminated an important principle. The professional man will have a greater impact on society if he has learned to view himself and his profession with detachment; the more abstract scholar will find that his horizons are wider if he has some degree of awareness of his physical surroundings.
No branch of knowledge should be rejected simply because it has practical value or, for that matter, because it has no practical value. The sole criterion should be that of excellence. If the study of a subject requires the integrity of thought and the quality of mind normally associated with good scholarship, it matters little whether the subject is abstract in the extreme or of immediate material significance. Indeed, the main value of a university education lies in the interaction between the minds of scholars and students having varied interests and experiences, and in the sharpening of the intellect that results from the interchange of ideas. Excellence is infectious and, if judiciously spread, can extend into widely different fields of endeavour.

We considered the desirability of extending into law, medicine and engineering. Our deliberations led us to the conclusion that, without prejudice to future action, the time was not yet ripe to establish a law school. It appeared that graduates of the Melbourne and Monash law schools often had difficulty in finding the postgraduate employment necessary for them to complete their professional training. It did appear, however, that we could profitably introduce a course in legal studies which would not only be of academic value in its own right, but would provide a useful qualification for those of its graduates who might wish to enter an existing law school.

In the early days of our existence there appeared to be a strong case for establishing a medical school at La Trobe. The science schools were developing strongly and could provide much of the pre-clinical teaching as a foundation for clinical studies, while the University was in close proximity to several general hospitals as well as a network of psychiatric and geriatric institutions. Provision had been made in the campus plan for the future development of a medical school with ancillary facilities in an area adjoining the School of Biological Sciences.

I was urged strongly by several bodies and individuals to recommend that Council take steps to proceed with this plan and I was invited to join the (then) Hospital and Charities Commission, where this possibility was discussed at length. Nevertheless, I was not satisfied that the demand in Victoria for medical graduates would justify the establishment of a third medical school, even though enrolments at Melbourne and Monash appeared to have reached saturation. Accordingly, in 1970, I undertook a statistical study, admittedly involving some speculation as to future needs and trends, and reached the conclusion that ‘subject to the validity of my assumptions, the two existing medical schools in Melbourne can meet the foreseeable demand for graduates until about 1987, by which time an additional medical school will be needed. If one of the existing schools is expanded, the need for a third school will be delayed by approximately one year for every nine additional graduates per year added to the graduate output of Melbourne and Monash universities’.

Our data were appended to our submission to the Australian Universities Commission’s Committee on Medical Schools, which met first in June 1972 and recommended in July 1973 the expansion of the Melbourne and Monash medical schools to produce, between them, about fifty extra graduates per year. Thus the inclusion of a medical school at La Trobe is still a matter for the future. In the meantime the teams involved in pre-clinical studies have grown stronger and indeed have been successfully involved in a number of research projects of a medical nature.

The situation in regard to an engineering school is less clear. Statistics regarding supply and demand for engineering graduates in the 1960s indicated that the existing faculties at Melbourne and Monash would meet foreseeable requirements for some years to come, and we took no action to develop a comprehensive engineering school at La Trobe. A number of us, however, were conscious of the industrial, social and economic changes that were certain to occur through modern technological developments, particularly those related to solid state devices and computers and to chemical and biological processes. We foresaw an increasing need, in the very near future, for scientists and engineers who could enable Australia to take an adequate part in what had already become the second industrial revolution. It seemed to us that, irrespective of the overall demand, there was an urgent need to produce engineering
graduates with a stronger background in the physical and biological sciences than is normal in most engineering courses, and with advanced training in communication, chemical and biological engineering. A proposal for this effect was considered by the University in 1973. After considerable discussion it was decided to limit the proposal for the time being to communication engineering.

Since it was a requirement of the Universities Commission that it should be advised of the introduction of new courses and its approval sought for those considered to be major developments, our intention to develop a course in communication engineering within the School of Physical Sciences was included in our submission in 1971 to the Commission for the forthcoming triennium, entry to the two-year course being at Bachelor of Science level. The course would be thus at graduate level, leading to a degree in Bachelor of Communication Engineering. It would provide an alternative avenue for science graduates who might otherwise seek graduate work in other areas, and would not materially affect the number of enrolled students in the University, nor would it involve the heavy costs normally associated with engineering education. Despite this, the AUC in May 1972, stated the following:

The Commission believes that engineering science should not be introduced as a new discipline in a university as a part of another school or faculty, but that if engineering is to be developed at a university, it should be in the form of an integrated and balanced School of Engineering in which the major branches of engineering are represented. The Commission is also concerned that the course proposed by La Trobe University would not necessarily receive professional recognition. There is, in addition, some evidence that, with the rapid development of engineering and technology courses in colleges of advanced education, the case for further engineering places in universities is relatively weak. Accordingly, the Commission believes that La Trobe University ought not to implement its proposals on Engineering Science.

The University was not prepared to accept these views and, whilst appreciating the Commission's concern over the possible appearance of another integrated and balanced engineering school, our limited proposals should not have been considered in that light. There followed a prolonged interchange of letters and visits, culminating in the acceptance of our proposal by the Commission, conveyed in a letter dated 4 July 1973, subject to our assurance that no comprehensive engineering school was involved. The Council decided, on 18 February 1974, to establish a department and a chair in communication engineering within the School of Physical Sciences, and the first professor took up duty at the beginning of 1975. It was agreed that the annual cost should be absorbed in the recurrent budget of the University. The establishment of the department was facilitated by a substantial grant from a private source.

Other professional areas, such as architecture, dentistry and veterinary science, were not seriously considered during the first decade, but both the academic and physical structures are such that these, or related disciplines, may be readily introduced when appropriate.

Residential and social planning

From the very beginning of La Trobe there had been much discussion of how best to mix the various disciplines together so as to provide the maximum of opportunity for informal discussion between chemist and philosopher, mathematician and sociologist. In my inaugural lecture in 1967, I outlined the approach which we had decided to adopt:

I am convinced that there is a critical size of a community of students, beyond which the incentive to step outside one's own field of study rapidly diminishes. Opinions vary on the determination of the critical size, but it is the considered opinion of the University's Council that a community of about a thousand students, together with the appropriate number of professors, lecturers and tutors, is large enough to encompass a wide variety of interests and, at the same time, small enough to provide the kind of intellectual and social environment in which curiosity and catholicity of interest can be encouraged to expand.

Accordingly, we are dividing the University into a group of colleges, each being a
The First Decade

self-contained community of appropriate size. It is not feasible in a metropolitan university to provide living accommodation for all students, however desirable this may be. Nevertheless, we do intend to provide for non-resident students in the colleges all the facilities enjoyed by resident students other than a place in which to sleep. In the design of the first two colleges, Glenn and Menzies, steps were taken to include in them more than the usual provision for academic activities, including lecture rooms, study space and accommodation for teaching staff. We were fortunate in arranging the appointment of an eminent classical scholar, Professor A.D. Trendall, as a University Fellow in residence at Menzies College.

Our ambitious plans for the integration of academic and collegiate life were never realised. Although in the initial year or two the first two Colleges, Glenn and Menzies, seemed to be headed for success, it became apparent that a number of factors were combining to prevent the full development of the concept. At this stage the third College, Chisholm, was planned on a different basis, taking into account the growing interest of students in a less formal type of accommodation. Since government grants to universities were determined on a triennial basis an agreement had been reached between the universities and the Universities Commission to avoid the hiatus in planning and building expenditure at the end of each triennium by the advance approval of up to roughly the annual expenditure for such projects in the expiring triennium. These were known as ‘green light’ projects, in which there was keen internal competition for inclusion. Professor Jim Morrison, as Chairman of the Planning Committee for Chisholm College and a member of the Council, presented Council with an outline of the plans, which involved a departure from the conventional pattern of separate wings for male and female students, the allocation of rooms being independent of the gender of the students. On the question of urgency he warmed to the task and in his enthusiasm recommended that the college should be a ‘red light’ project. The plans were accepted and the college was built.

Opposition to the ‘college concept’ came from many sources. The attitude of young people was changing; this was manifest in their reaction against any form of parental or institutional restraint, and even extended to their preference for the pizza parlour rather than the formal dining hall. This attitude was reflected in the complaint that, for those not in residence and thus the majority, the college provided nothing but a locker. Many members of the academic staff felt that their participation in college life, which was intended to foster closer communication between those in various disciplines, would, in fact, adversely effect their communion with their own kind. Some of the more radical students saw this proposed departure from normal practice as a veiled attempt by the authorities to limit their solidarity and their freedom to protest. It was a departure from what they had come to expect, and there is nobody so reactionary as a radical student.

The college question was debated at great length and became the subject of a seminar held on 29 and 30 November 1968. The findings of the seminar were less than enthusiastic.

Meanwhile, the Students’ Representative Council considered the matter sufficiently important to send one of its members to the United Kingdom and the USA to visit a number of new universities that were developing on lines similar to those at La Trobe. The Council welcomed this student initiative and agreed to provide funds for the SRC to send a second member of their own choice on the basis that, in such a venture, two heads were better than one. On their return, they reported favourably on the universities visited but by this time the tide of opinion in the University had turned against the college system, which moreover failed to gain the support of the Universities Commission. Accordingly, we reverted to the more usual arrangement involving the establishment of a central union, while the colleges continued essentially as residential facilities.

In spite of its delayed start, the Union was well established by the end of the decade. The first three colleges, Glenn, Menzies and Chisholm, were also in full operation. But quite apart from the academic and social implications of the college system, there was still a serious shortage of accommodation for students at a reasonable cost. On the initiative of Frank Barnes, a
Building La Trobe University

group of flats close to the University was acquired and made available on a rental basis to La Trobe University personnel. The success of this enterprise prompted the University to embark on a novel venture into on-site housing, with the construction of a block of twenty-four flats on land at the southern end of the campus. These flats, offering seventy-two places, were rented to University students and staff through the agency of La Trobe University Housing Limited, a non-profit-making company established for the purpose. Next came the development on adjacent land of twenty terrace units providing sixty-three places for groups of two, three, four or six people. To select the project design, a competition was held among final year architecture students at the University of Melbourne, two of whom took part later in the detailed planning of this, the second stage of the University’s staff-student housing project, which was immediately successful and has remained consistently popular amongst University people.

The end of the first decade

In retrospect, it may be said that by the end of the first decade La Trobe University had met the requirement of rapid growth. So far as one can judge at an early stage, in the quality of its graduates it had fulfilled the expectations of its founders, while the academic staff had achieved an excellent reputation for scholarship as judged by their publications and their recognition by learned societies. Its physical development and landscaping have been widely praised, while the foresight of the founders in giving high priority to the Library, has been more than justified.

On the other hand, the breadth of its offerings has been limited, mainly by the apparent lack of demand in the community for graduates in the professional areas. Although the concept of a collegiate university was not realised, the three colleges provided living accommodation in 1976 for 841 students, whilst other University facilities provided for a further 231.

My task during the first decade was made easier by the constant support and encouragement, not only of Sir Archibald Glenn and his successor in 1972, Mr Justice (later Sir Reginald) Smithers, but also of the chairmen and members of the Council’s committees, all busy people who gave generously of their time in the interests of the University.

For one who has been closely associated with the development of the University, it is very difficult to make an objective judgement of how well the institution has progressed, especially when his association with it ceased formally more than a decade ago. I therefore conclude this contribution by saying that whether or not we got the University off to a flying start, we have at least left the way open for other developments to take place when considered desirable. I am sure my former colleagues would agree with me in expressing the hope that, as the years go by and the University grows older, it will not grow old.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid, p. 22.