

THE FUTURE AND ITS FRIENDS

Changing Paradigms Of Diversity

Dr Muyesser Durur, FAHRI, MAICD

Executive Director, People and Culture,

La Trobe University, Australia.

Introduction

I have been reflecting a lot on the theme of this conference - *Future Directions*. I have started to wonder what is our purpose in talking about the future, and what conscious and unconscious assumptions we are working from.

As a young girl growing up in regional Turkey in an impoverished rural family with 10 brothers, I knew that my likely life would not easily satisfy the dreams and ambitions of the self fulfilled person I wanted to be.

My drive to get educated, to achieve a European tertiary education where I could get a better understanding of the world and my own place in it – as a woman, as a person with a proud heritage of centuries of Turkish civilisation, and as a citizen of the world - was perfectly consistent with my dreams and plans. I subsequently moved to Australia, a multicultural country of opportunity and space for everyone. I became involved in ethnic affairs and in equal opportunity. My constant search for meaning and learning brought me to Human Resources in educational organisations like La Trobe University, which encompass both a core business of learning and a focus on people. All these decisions and events seem to me like clear parts of a coherent pattern.

At the same time I know, as do all of us, how much such a picture is an illusion created by ‘retrospective coherence’. We have a very human inclination to make sense of chaos and complexity, and to assemble coherent stories out of essentially unplanned and dynamic combinations of environments and events. This is what has started me wondering about my intentions and assumptions in talking to you about *Future Directions*.

So today I want to explore a number of inter-related themes with you. These are:

- **How do we see, sense and understand the future?** – as a wish-list, as a set of aspirations or hopes or dreams, or indeed oppositions and resistance; or as a dynamic, complex, evolving process that we may contribute to, or oppose, but even where we can understand it we know it is beyond our control.
- **What might these different perspectives on the future tell us about how to develop and improve our organisations and enhance their sustainability?**
- We have come to understand the future is a complex, evolving process, and I have come to understand through my experience of work that **to be sustainable our organisations must encourage and engage with diversity more than in the past**. How do we move quickly beyond what are still marginalised equal opportunity initiatives and rhetorical commitments to managing difference?
- Finally I want to explore **the importance of diversity in building strong and peaceful communities as well as productive and creative organisations, and show** how at La Trobe we are attempting to build some new paradigms into both our academic and organisational practice to give life to our vision of being *open, transformative, engaged, accountable*, and *sustainable*, particularly within the context of La Trobe’s strong commitment to diverse community engagement..

The Future

In 1998 a US author, Virginia Postrel¹ wrote *The Future and its Enemies* - a spirited exploration about how progress really occurs. This challenged many of my dearly held beliefs about the desirability of planning, controlling and managing the future. Postrel’s key point is that encouraging and accepting unplanned, diverse, open-ended trial and error and differences is the key to a better future, rather than conformity to a central vision.

The book opens with Postrel citing the dilemma the founders of Disneyland faced as they stopped to review and plan how to conceptualise a whole new version of Tomorrowland - one of their four magical fantasylands. Tomorrowland was out of date! It was different from the

other kingdoms because in the USA their version of Frontierland is full of Davy Crocketts and Jim Bowies and has continuing meaning, at least to them; Fantasyland is a place full of floating castles, and where Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck roam the streets; and Adventureland is about the excitement of the great outdoors in whatever country you live.

For those of us who are old enough to remember, Tomorrowland has always been billed as 'the promise of things to come'. For Disneyland's management, suddenly the earlier conceptualisation of Tomorrowland - advanced electronic gadgets, buildings full of chrome and steel, a ride called Mission to Mars and a circle vision theatre - needed to be replaced with things that grow and inspire. Suddenly the future means to us the types of pictures created by the film Avatar – an extraordinarily diverse range of plant and animal life and of the various ways people connect with the earth from which they draw sustenance. Of course the future also needs to have new technologies, new machines and of course new expressions of relationship.

In 30 years time it is also very likely that our children's children will wonder why we ever saw the future like we do now.

Predicting the Future

So – we can all agree that our visions of the future have changed within a relatively short timeframe. We can now envision or even aspire to a future that is full of quite different things than our parents may have dreamed of or imagined. We know that our new dreams and aspirations are already out of date, being replaced quickly by the manifestation of a different future that is beyond our ken.

How do we approach predicting the future?

We could take the traditional strategic planning approach, where we used to gather as much data as possible about trends and possible impacts on us outside our control and try to chart a path that would maximise the growth and development of our organisations or our careers or our businesses. We no longer approach strategy this simplistically – but for many people their changing pictures of the future are embedded in existing objects, events, social behaviours or even values and philosophies that will change.

However, from the point of view of managing for the future and shaping future directions this is becoming less and less useful as an approach and almost entirely untenable as 'the' approach.

As I read the *Future and Its Enemies*, I was simultaneously delighted by Postrel's criticism of those who approach the future by constraining things, and equally irritated with her criticism of others like myself who see dealing with the future as a matter of building bridges to what we desire. Yet she has a point. Her premise is that we cannot predict the future. By viewing it through a strong reliance on the present we know, we will fail to benefit from what the future offers. One of the key points she makes that is probably relevant to us all can be seen in the powerful simplicity of her point that for our children's generation, using a career metaphor of 'climbing the ladder to success' is almost entirely useless. In many cases these days rungs are missing from the ladder, and in others hierarchical advancement and success are no longer synonyms. Instead Postrel substitutes the powerful career method of surfing and developing our children's ability to surf. We can see surfing in many ways. It may well be the skill of knowing how to be adept and clever at using the world wide web and social networking, or perhaps very powerfully for us Australians, possessing the skill and coordination to be in the water, watching and sensing carefully, being ready and able to deal with the size of the swell that comes, and with the destinations to which this swell can take us.

Determining the future

We hear a lot of discussion both within our organisations and in the wider community about shaping technology, about governments' responsibility to avoid mistakes in service delivery

and policy implementation, about plans for orderly progress and development, about risk assessment and risk management. These all imply a belief that either someone or some group of people (presumably with superhuman insight or enormous good luck) can or currently do control our futures. If we could only elect, educate, find, develop the right people they could invent and manage systems that would keep us safe and happy.

I have felt concerned lately that we seem to be regressing to an expectation that even natural disasters like fire, earthquake, or cyclone must have some omnipotent person or agency who is immediately to blame for not foreseeing and preventing them. I am not talking here about global warming but about the type of response that we see with the Victorian bushfires, or the US saw with hurricane Katrina, that government experts should have been able to foresee and prevent these disasters. Or at the very least, 'they' should somehow have been able to find and develop the right prevention or safety measures of the type that taxpayers are notoriously unwilling to fund. Reviewing what happened after the event and capturing as much learning as possible after disasters like these may help us learn how to do better in the future in other emergencies. However I sometimes see the shadow of a pathway back to medieval times fall across our communities when 'out of control' events like these occur. Sometimes we do not seem far from outcries about devils, witches and the wrath of an all-powerful deity.

Today in Australia and other Western countries we still harbour underlying beliefs that our leaders - be they church leaders, industry leaders, political leaders or organisational leaders - can set the right vision. We then believe (or hope) that their strength of vision, will and commitment can make the future we want to come true. We expect them to provide the blueprint for a safe and secure future for us.

When we vote our governments out of office in the hope that a new team can do better, we rarely ask ourselves 'how did I contribute to the failures of the outgoing government?'. Nor do many of us ask ourselves on a day to day basis 'How could I do my job and my role in the world differently so that the Government, the CEO, the Leader can do a better job of creating the sort of community, organisation, or country that I want?'

Nowadays most of our organisations have clear strategies in place to help us all do better in this regard. We have

- strategic plans that set a vision for all to enable alignment
- incentives, systems and structures to support whole of organisation thinking
- development programs and delegations to build self-responsibility, and leadership and transparency across the organisation.

But even in the Human Resources Departments in our Universities – learning institutions where we should be most conscious of the need to liberate, rather than control, people's talents - we still find ourselves working from the belief that we either already know or will be able to determine the future. We have developed the strange idea there is 'a best person for the job' when we all know there are usually a number of good people for the job who would do it differently; we also know that structures need to be helpful but we rarely move very far from the 19th Century wisdom of Max Weber; we know that approaches to financial management are forever a moveable feast; and that many of the skills we need for our people we don't yet know how to recognise or name. Indeed it seems a good time for us to pause and perhaps congratulate us all on how well we are managing the speed and size and adaptability needs of the changes we encounter.

We still operate from a set of assumptions that we can and do control or determine the future, or that at the very least we must try. We fear that the only alternative is chaos or anarchy, or, at minimum, a loss of the civil society that most nations have struggled to achieve over hundreds and, for some, thousands of years.

Embracing a dynamic future

Whether we like it or not it is increasingly apparent that unless we are simply spectators we cannot just keep changing wish-lists. Unless we believe in superhuman leaders, or achievable static utopias, or a magic technology that will at once ennoble people, remove poverty and disease, and provide magically sustainable systems of living, we must focus on contributing to, rather than controlling, the future. As leaders of people we need our organisations to focus on enabling our people to be the best they can be and to contribute in the most positive way they can to their own development and success, and consequently to the development of their communities – be these their businesses, their learning institutions, their nations or the planet itself.

Some observers argue that we should face the fact that the future is not controllable, but rather a dynamic, constantly changing and adapting system, and that we should learn to enjoy and embrace this bumpy ride of adaptation and constant change, and cease trying to develop one size fits all regulations, and solutions to problems based on a single vision of the future. Rather we need to learn, and help others learn, the skills of embracing this dynamic challenge of constant change and adaptation, recognise that we are a contributing part of it, and participate fully in our own evolution – through learning, awareness of ourselves and of others around us, and through adaptation and creativity. This type of strategy is familiar in our organisations and indeed ought to be what we stand for. It involves approaches where leaders or leadership teams establish vision and goals, delegate the design, the ‘how to’ as far as possible down the organisation, and at the same time support cross organisation networks to both maximise alignment and also to achieve organisational learning, knowledge building and problem solving.

When I look at the future in this context, I like most of us am somewhat suspicious of the potentially deregulated, free for all, survival of the roughest and toughest type of world that we fear it might lead to. However we have much to learn from facing up to the very limited degree to which we can control the future. If we recognise that the complexity of influences that combine to create tomorrow cannot be fully within our conscious knowledge, let alone control, we can begin to be serious about building the skills and the organisations we need for this environment.

As I have confronted myself with some of these realisations I have become more and more aware that probably all of us have a long way to go to develop the adaptable systems and approaches that enable us to create the kinds of flexible organisations where people can be the best they can be; where the boundaries are set by the organisation’s role, values and purpose; and where individuals can follow the learning pathways that best contribute to their own development as well as to the development of their organisations and communities.

Virginia Postrel and others (including some parts of me) argue that enemies of the future are those who seek a regulated, engineered world where stability and control are highly valued. Friends of the future in her terms are those who see a world of constant creation, discovery and competition and where evolution and learning are highly valued as the key to successful sustainable living.

When I think about my own life, the things that stand out as making the difference in my life and career are the mistakes I have made, the life choice lotteries I have won, the intuitions I have followed, and the opportunities I have chosen and foregone, even though unaware of their full implications and consequences. Times of great change in my life may have sometimes been the most dangerous but also the most rewarding. As the mother of a 21 year old I sometimes shudder at the memory of myself as a 16 year old Turkish teenage girl alone in Berlin. But these were also the some of the most alive and most full of learning periods in my life. Certainly through these I learnt to be accountable for my own decisions rather than to blame others or indeed my deity. I also learnt to blame no-one else, and I believe these are two characteristics that are essential to adaptability.

When I look at La Trobe's program for organisational change and development, I can identify many of the changes we are seeking to achieve as being based on the approach where learning underpins our development; and where shared goals, vision objectives and values are a way of enabling decentralised decision making, and of creating order and alignment across the organisation rather than the enforcement of detailed decrees, plans and procedures. Not that I think we are yet 'embracing the future' in the way Ms Postrel envisages. And I notice that my own and my organisation's 'conservatism' in her terms, continues to require a considerable number of rules, regulations and procedures. However I believe that in our own way we at La Trobe are facing the issue of the 'uncontrolled' future without shying away from the challenges.

Our new **Strategic Plan**ⁱⁱ for example is cast within four simple and clear objectives. It states that

We will know we have been successful if we expand our capacity to transform student lives through education and learning, if we produce more new and useful knowledge through research that is judged to be relevant and of high quality by its intended users, if we support the professional and personal development of our staff, and if in all our activities we have demonstrably contributed to institutional, environmental and social sustainability.

We see this strategic plan as a 'living document' which will itself evolve as the University develops over the period to 2015. It acknowledges some of the issues I have been exploring in this paper; for example it states:

We cannot take success for granted – we will have to work hard for it, we will have to constantly monitor and evaluate our performance, and we will have to react quickly to changed circumstances. The policy context and operational environment of universities are in a state of flux, and we will have to find ways of embracing new opportunities and relinquishing some inherited practices in order to flourish. At the same time, we must be alert to any potential threat to our core values of academic freedom and integrity that may arise.

Traditionally La Trobe has seen itself as having a strong community contribution responsibility and a strong focus on advancing community through creating greater opportunities for those who have previously been underrepresented in higher education. *Our Objective 1 – transforming student lives through learning* -states clearly:

We will extend opportunity by significantly increasing student enrolments on all our campuses, and we will establish partnership programs and pathways aimed at removing barriers to access for students from under-represented groups. We will review and where necessary redesign the curriculum to ensure that each award program is relevant to the learning needs of students and leads to clear career pathways.

We already have or are developing outreach and partnership programs with disadvantaged groups and low socio-economic status schools in our feeder areas.

In the **Leadership Development** program we commenced last year at La Trobe we are beginning to build the feedback and cross organisation connections that we need to achieve a more adaptable organisation able to work in an organic way to take advantage of the dynamic changes that we know are arising continuously. We have looked at our structure and recognised that the type of matrix structure of flexible perspectives and relationships that we, like many other universities, are evolving, needs work to operate effectively. We are clear that we need to focus not so much on the structure but on our people. As one of our managers recently put it – 'the challenge is not so much to build a matrix structure as it is to create a

matrix in the minds of our managers'. Our aim in developing in this direction is to let individuals make the judgements and negotiate trade-offs that drive the organisation toward a shared strategic objective.

Changing Paradigms of Diversity

Issues of equal opportunity, fairness and diversity have been woven profoundly through my life and career. As I progressed as a migrant: first from a rural district to Turkey's capital Ankara – one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world; as a female 'international student' studying Metallurgy in Germany; and as a new immigrant to Australia, I have had more than my share of both the advantages and disadvantages that come from being part of the group we label as 'CALD – a culturally and linguistically diverse' person in the workplace.

This experience has led me to agree with the emerging hypothesis that a key value of diversity in the workplace is that different perspectives and experiences bring new and different ways of approaching work or solving problems. However, I am sure many of you, especially those who are seen as 'culturally and linguistically diverse' also share my experience that this does not add the value it could to an organisation's advantage unless the organisation and people in it have the skills - including listening, a spirit of inquiry, and respect for difference - needed to enable them to listen to and understand the possibilities in culturally different insights and unfamiliar perspectives, and the ability to embrace, rather than shun, the roller coaster of change.

In 2007 the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) received a Report entitled Civil Paths to Peaceⁱⁱⁱ. This report was the result of a Commission established by CHOGM in the context of global concerns about group violence and terrorism and the subsequent fear-based discrimination and retaliatory violence emerging as a result. The Commission's mandate was *to explore initiatives to promote mutual understanding and respect among all faiths and communities in the Commonwealth*. The Commission was chaired by the Nobel Prize winning economist Professor Amartya Sen.

The Commission concluded that *there is a strong need for much more dialogue and discussion on the richness of human identities and the counterproductive nature of placing people in rigidly separated identity boxes*. It goes on to conclude that *accepting diversity, respecting all human beings and understanding the richness of perspectives that people have are of great relevance not only to the Commonwealth but also to the rest of the world*.

The report starts by delineating the connection between respect and understanding on the one hand and disquiet, disaffection and violence on the other. It articulates a deeper, more active and more inquiring meaning of 'respect and understanding' and as a result I find that it challenges in a positive way some of the beliefs I and others hold about ourselves in relation to tolerance and fairness.

*... it makes sense to define **respect** with reference to rights and equal treatment but [also] to broaden it beyond the issue of race so that it refers to a way of treating others, whatever their age, race, gender or other aspects of their identity, with fairness and with dignity. ... Respect is about acknowledging a common humanity, and a preparedness to treat everyone, no matter how different their worldviews, with the dignity they deserve because of their humanity. It is as much about how we treat those with lower social positions as it is about how we respond to those who are more senior.*

***Understanding** implies an ability to grasp what someone else is saying in order to get to the heart of what they are trying to communicate. To do this requires a willingness to put aside one's own preconceived notions in order to appreciate their worldview. Understanding therefore involves the acknowledgement that one's own culture and experience are not the only models for thinking or acting.*

These are strong claims about the power of diversity based on respect and understanding in building both a deeper understanding of the sources of violence and conflict and in building 'Civil Paths' to peace. The Commission did not dismiss the importance of addressing other contributing issues and causes of civil violence such as poverty and inequality. However it provides examples which challenge our preconceptions. For example it argues that poverty is rarely by itself responsible for violence. It cites the example of Kolkata (Calcutta) which is one of the poorest cities in the world but which also has a very low crime rate – the lowest for any Indian city. The Commission attributes this difference, at least in part, to the city's long history of being a thoroughly mixed city, where neighbourhoods have not been separated on ethnic and religious lines, as has occurred elsewhere. The Commission also cites other social influences such as the huge role of shared cultural activities in the city which mobilise citizens in cooperative directions.

I am talking to you about respect for and understanding of diversity in this global context, because I am coming to understand that those of us who have had responsibilities to promote equal opportunity and diversity in the somewhat narrower contexts of organisations and local communities may have settled for too little in terms of the value and benefits we are seeking from recognising and fully leveraging the diversity in our organisations.

If we look at the future in the more dynamic ways I have outlined above we can begin to see many more ways than we have hitherto explored to actively encourage and productively exploit the diversities (if I may use such a term) that we have available to us to contribute more effectively to the sustainability and adaptability of our organisations.

Diversity is a reality in today's world. With increasing global awareness and consciousness it is now becoming widely recognised that cultural diversity skills are central to developing a more peaceful and sustainable world for ourselves now, and as a result hopefully, for the future.

As Universities – with our core role of transforming lives through learning - we have great opportunities to utilise the diversity of our staff and student populations to help build new ways of working across differences. We can do far more with what we already have at La Trobe and at the moment we are working to make immediate progress in this area.

Learning how to '*connect with others, explore one another's points of view, work out agreements about how to proceed with the task at hand, learning not to be afraid of conflict, learning how to talk about hard things, to take risks, to be wrong*'. (Thomas and Ely 2001^{iv}) These are the core skills in working with diversity. They are also however the core skills in teamwork, effective negotiation, as well as in community building and developing and enhancing peaceful civil societies. We have the opportunity to use the gift of the diversity of newly represented groups in the workforce and in student populations to help us learn and change both our organisations and our communities.

The book *The Future and its Enemies* talks about the concept of *verges*, developed by historian Daniel Boorstin. *Verges* are seen as frontier regions, not as a sharp border but as the '*place of encounter between something and something else*'. They are places where differences interact. Boorstin hypothesises that this dynamic diversity and the rich cross fertilisation of ideas, perspectives and talents it brings are have been transformative at many points in history. Postrel herself argues that currently we live in a time marked by many verges – between formerly segregated economies, nations and cultures; between home and work, male and female, East and West, children and adults. Verges create a blurring. They do not turn one thing into another. Nor do they create homogeneity. Rather, she argues they create new realities. In a cosmopolitan city like Melbourne, and being part of what has been referred to as "the white tribe of Asia"^v and at a University like La Trobe, we have enormous opportunities to experience and learn from the *verges* that we experience in our day to day interactions with each other, with students, and with the wider world. Some of these *verges* will exist uniquely for us in our realm and some of them we will only have the opportunity to

learn from for a short time. Learning, however from these verges is not only an exciting opportunity but if we are serious about our values, it is also an imperative.

These insights, I believe, offer us exciting new opportunities to evolve and further integrate our approaches and strategies to promote and manage equal opportunity and diversity. We need to build on and evolve further our previous paradigms of diversity and equal opportunity. We certainly do not want to abandon them or see them as no longer relevant. They still provide important strategies well as important goals, achievements and learning.

In Australia, despite our relative lack of exposure to entrenched and violently defended differences, we have evolved some very innovative and comprehensive approaches to assuring social inclusion and equal opportunity. A 'fair go' appears to be deeply embedded in our national values. I want to outline what I see as the changing paradigms of diversity that I have experienced and participated in over recent years both to affirm the value of each of these approaches and also to explore the ways we can develop these strategies further to add value for our organisations and our communities.

Outlawing discrimination

Australia is an interesting place. We often express our goals in terms of what we are trying to get away from. A good example of this is that our laws that underpin greater opportunities for diversity are expressed as "Anti-Discrimination" laws in nearly every state.

Eliminating unlawful discrimination by ensuring the university community obeys laws prohibiting unlawful discrimination is essential to provide the preconditions and foundations for equal opportunity for all. Unfortunately discrimination, both conscious and unconscious, remains in our organisations and communities – hopefully less so in universities than in other organisations. Direct discrimination has become clearer as case law and legislative change clarify the boundaries. However we continue to learn about the nature of indirect discrimination.

Pragmatic rationales for strategies built on this paradigm include managing reputational risk and the legal costs of lawsuits and complaints; and avoiding vicarious liability for acts of our employees by making sure the organisation has done its part to inform employees of the law.

Unforeseen negative consequences often arise because the exact definition of what constitutes discrimination is not always clear. This sometimes leads to people being timid in personnel practices where, for example cultural difference is involved, and can work against open exploration and discussion of different perspectives which are necessary to fully leveraging or utilising diversity.

For example, apparent respect and tolerance can often actually be a carefulness and politeness based on fear of offending. This is likely to end up in actual practice as exclusion because people, in their fear about offending or 'getting it wrong', begin to have little to say or share with other people who are different.

Proactive equal opportunity

We need not only to have a "moving away from" strategy – we also need a "moving towards" paradigm.

Proactive equal opportunity strategies continue to be developed and are becoming more sophisticated in their recognition of the complexity of factors which contribute to disadvantage and therefore need to be overcome to provide equal opportunity in practice as well as in name. As we get more confident and take more risks, we will begin to reach the goals currently hidden by the unintended camouflage of what we don't want and will be able to state more clearly what we hope for and expect in our efforts to be much more adept with and embracing of difference and diversity.

For example, La Trobe has recently developed a new **Indigenous Employment Strategy**. We are using our own and others' experience to build a realistic strategy which is integrated with both our Indigenous student initiatives and our community outreach activities.

We have the largest share of Victoria's Indigenous Australians within the regions in which we operate, along with the most number of socially disadvantaged and economically marginalised postcodes in Victoria.

La Trobe's *Closing the Gap: 35 in 5 Indigenous Employment Strategy 2010-2015* commits the University to work in partnership with Indigenous Australian communities to create an additional 35 job opportunities. We aim to become an employer of choice for Indigenous Australians in the higher education sector. Implementation will include targeted promotion, community engagement, recruitment, professional development, personal support and other retention strategies. We will ensure a variety of pathways are created - through fulltime, continuing, part-time, contractual, special project, and seasonal jobs, in an environment that is culturally inclusive and supportive of Indigenous Australians.

The Strategy is tied to a larger program of Indigenous Australian student recruitment, community engagement and partnership, and innovation in Indigenous Australian research, engagement, teaching and learning. It is designed to not only suit the current business needs of the university but also seeks to align future Indigenous employment opportunities with the University's overall business development.

Joint staff and management commitment to the Strategy has been strengthened by inclusion in the La Trobe University Collective Agreement 2009 of the targeted recruitment of seven equivalent full-time ongoing Indigenous Australian staff members per annum over the life of the agreement.

More generally, La Trobe like other like other organisations in Australia has pursued equal opportunity by developing benchmarks based on catchment area population composition. Organisations then set targets and implement outreach, training and partnership programs to assist us to reach the benchmarks. However, outside the carefully acquired understanding of HR managers and EO practitioners, there is still considerable organisation and wider community confusion about simple concepts like how to differentiate between targets and quotas for employing and training staff. Also there are sometimes justified concerns where one disadvantage such as race is seen as more 'entitled' than another seemingly similarly disadvantaged set of people, such as those with similarly low socio-economic status.

In the development of our Strategic Plan at La Trobe we are very conscious of the potential of the University to contribute in a very significant way to the development of all disadvantaged groups in our community. In addition to our Indigenous Australian Employment Strategy we are placing a strong emphasis on the practical measures we will be taking to provide new educational opportunities for students from regional and rural areas, from low socio-economic status households, and other groups who currently significantly under-represented in higher education.

Proactive equal opportunity strategies are often at least partly characterised as social inclusion and justified in broad government policy terms as community building and promoting social cohesion, particularly in terms of short-circuiting intergenerational and entrenched cycles of disadvantage. For example the vision for the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Agenda is one where *all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society*^{vi}.

Individual organisations like La Trobe also see the benefits of such programs as being able to recruit from the widest possible talent pool; ensuring our relevance by engaging with our community; enhancing our image/brand and our social capital; and of course being educated and responsible corporate citizens.

Equal opportunity practitioners and leaders have also come to understand that there may be unforeseen negative consequences within this paradigm. Special programs are often seen as simply favouring a particular group, especially where the immediate organisational value added is not well understood. We still hear complaints of reverse discrimination - ‘what about programs for white males?’ is a common unsophisticated version. The sarcastic academic version is usually a derogatory comment along the lines of the comic slogan from the 70’s that advocated ‘Land Rights for Gay Whales’. In Universities, where concerns for merit and academic excellence are high priorities, equal opportunity programs are sometimes seen as threatening to ‘quality’. In pursuing equal opportunity it remains important for us to keep all sides of this discussion open, both to more diverse and precise understandings of ‘merit’, and to ensuring that such programs do not further harm disadvantaged groups by lowering the value of their qualifications and achievements by lack of rigour and adequate attention to development and support.

Recognising, celebrating and valuing diversity

Over the last decade the concept of *valuing diversity* has been given increasing amounts of space and discussion in organisational and business journals. The discussion represents a shift from the ‘social case for equal opportunity’ to the ‘business case for diversity’ approach.

The expected benefits from working with this paradigm most often include better relationships with customers who feel more included when the organisation contains ‘people like them’. This can often involve active outreach to customers through staff from their own ethnic background. For example in all our international student business units I am sure we can see considerable greater cultural diversity because we are seeking to have as much acceptance by, and insight into, our customers as possible. Additional languages are also obvious assets that people from different cultures often bring. A broader version of this is at the management level in ensuring that the organisation incorporates as wide ranging a perspective and knowledge base as possible.

Along with exploration of the benefits of this paradigm has come exploration of the problems. A well-known management educator, Marshall Goldsmith^{vii} recently wrote in his Harvard Business Review Blog about *Diversity Tension*.

As leaders, the rich diversity of culture and thought around the world is one of our greatest resources — if we use it as such. Differences of ideas, methods, motivations, and competencies can be used to build great organizations. However, this wonderful resource can be a double-edge sword as cross-cultural exchanges present unlimited possibilities for misunderstandings and cultural blunders.

As companies grow and expand around the world, diversity in the workplace increases. Successful organizations identify, recruit, and train professionals from a diverse blend of backgrounds, cultures, styles, and motivations into positions of increasing power and responsibility.

*In the midst of individual contributors with such diverse backgrounds, success calls for leaders who are comfortable with **diversity tension**. Diversity tension is the stress and strain that accompanies mixtures of differences and similarities. The task of leaders working in the global business arena is not to minimize this tension, but rather to use it as a creative force for change, and, of course, to make quality decisions in the midst of identity differences, similarities, and pressures.*

Embracing diversity as a resource for sustainability and for creating new realities

This brings me back to the point where I began these thoughts about diversity. I believe we are currently evolving a new paradigm of fully embracing diversity in a way that enables us to leverage and fully utilise its value in building sustainable, adaptable and vital organisations.

Not only can we learn from specific different perspectives, backgrounds and experiences, but also we can learn from the actual processes of leading and working with difference as an experience and skill.

Strong skills of working with difference are needed at all levels – in customer service, in building productive teams, in managing dynamic adaptable organisations and in building harmonious peaceful inclusive communities and nations. What is clear is that we will all need to develop new skills and improved mindsets to be able to achieve full value from this paradigm shift.

To quote Goldsmith:

One step is to not make any assumptions about the cultural base or outlook with whom you work or do business. Another is to understand the dynamics of diversity (through historical, political, and economic references), how it affects the workplace, worldviews, life and communication styles, ethics, and etiquette of co-workers.

This may seem simple enough to say but it means taking the time and making the effort to be aware of the unconscious patterns and assumptions that we have been using for decades to manage our lives. It also means learning to be open to and truly understand (in the sense of being able to appreciate another's world view) what other people are trying to communicate. As you can see just achieving this simple set of skills could create revolutionary change and improvement in most of our organisations.

Goldsmith asserts that developing positive diversity tension

takes an understanding of both the big things and the small things that form unique cultures, including leadership and work styles (for instance formal vs. informal); decision-making styles (e.g. intuitive vs. analytical); information-sharing methods (do people prefer written, oral, face-to-face, text, email, video conference, etc.); and motivations (these could be power, achievement, affiliation, money, etc.). It's not necessary to hold everyone's views on these matters, but it is important to accept that there are many different methods, positions, and styles by which people can accomplish goals and directives.

For those of us in responsible for supporting the culture change necessary to achieve value for the organisation in these areas, Goldsmith suggests that as leaders we need to understand that differences in race, culture, and background are advantages — not deficits — for effective teamwork and problem solving. He says that as leaders we need to:

- *Create an inclusive work environment where people feel welcomed and valued for sharing their opinions and skills*
- *Recognize and reward successes that result from valuing diversity*
- *Assess the different learning styles and strengths in people*
- *Involve people from a variety of backgrounds in decision-making and problem-solving processes*
- *Utilize the full potential of all employees and build on complementary skills, backgrounds, and cultural knowledge*
- *Refuse to accept behaviours that attack the self-respect of others and confront people who stereotype others or display prejudiced behaviour*
- *Participate in diversity training*
- *Involve a wide variety of people in their personal and professional lives, and take the time to get to know them*

Diversity itself creates new opportunities. Today more than ever before we communicate in and manage an enormous range of facts and concepts about ourselves, our organisations, our customers and our competitors, both in our own country and in many others. For the first time in history we can communicate faster than we can think. We are beginning to see more connections and paradigms underlying different metaphors in our organisations, and learning how to change these metaphors is often the basis for finding ways to achieve what we want. Diversity as an issue has grown from a simple notion of “a fair go for everyone” through a range of stages, to now where we tend to see working really well with diversity as an essential capability if we are to get the best for our organisations, our staff and our customers.

Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon^{viii} talks about evolution and diversity

... not as a series of tournaments for the occupation of a fixed set of environmental niches. Instead evolution brings about a proliferation of niches. The environments to which most biological organisms adapt are formed mainly of other organisms, and the environments to which human beings adapt, mainly of other human beings. Each new bird or mammal provides a niche for a new kind of flea.

References

- i Postrel, Virginia, *The Future and Its Enemies. The Growing Conflict Over Creativity, Enterprise and Progress*, The Free Press, New York, NY. 1998
- ii La Trobe University, *Strategic Plan 2010 – 2015 (Draft)*, June 2010.
- iii Commonwealth Secretariat, *Civil Paths to Peace. Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, UK, 2007.
- iv Ely, Robin J.; Thomas, David A., *Cultural Diversity at Work: The Effects of Diversity Perspectives on Work Group Processes and Outcomes*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2. (Jun., 2001), pp. 229-273.
- v Hardjono, Ratih, *White tribe of Asia : an Indonesian view of Australia*, Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, in association with Hyland House, 1993
- vi Commonwealth of Australia, *Social Inclusion Website*
<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au>, 2009
- vii Goldsmith, Marshall, *Learn to Embrace the Tension of Diversity*, June 16, 2010,
<http://blogs.hbr.org/goldsmith/2010/06/>
- viii Postrel, Virginia, op.cit.