Keynote Address


Mr J (Josh) I Owen, Director, Institute of Administration, University of New South Wales

Introduction by Raj Sharma, President Elect, AAIR

It gives me great pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker, Mr Josh Owen, who has been very supportive of AAIR. Looking at the environmental conditions in the Asian-Pacific region over the next decade, he will provide us with a context for higher education planning. Josh is well qualified to talk about this topic. Currently the Director of the Institute of Administration in the University of New South Wales, he has played a leadership role in management education over the past 25 years. In addition to his experience in higher education he has held several executive positions in the private sector. He has experience in looking at strategic planning from both the corporate and public sector perspectives, and has undertaken a number of consultancies in strategic planning and management throughout Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

Editor’s Note: Mr Owen’s presentation included some working exercises which involved participation by those attending. Because of their very nature - involving informal exchanges, these exercises were not amenable to incorporation within formal text and have for the most part, been excluded.

Josh Owen

It is important that each one of us has a vision, a mission, a purpose in life. Each of us must know who we are, what we are about, and where we are going. In short, unless you have a dream, you cannot make your dream come true.

This conference is a dream come true for Raj Sharma and a small group of people. About 18 months ago, Raj contacted me to discuss the idea of holding this conference, something which seemed an impossible dream. He talked, I encouraged, and here we are today. I don’t know the others who helped him make this dream come true, but it’s appropriate for me to acknowledge his own contribution because in a sense, I am going to discuss the anatomy of that dream this afternoon. Thus, please join me in congratulating Raj and his colleagues.

“If you can conceive it, if you can believe it, then you can achieve it.” In other words, if you can visualize something and have a vision, if your desire is strong enough to make it happen, then you can achieve it if you have a strategic action plan to make that dream come true. The lesson here is that if Raj had used logic ab initio, he would have been told that it can’t been done, that it won’t work, that we don’t need another society as we have for instance AITEA, and that if you do have a conference it must be held in Melbourne or Sydney, for no one would ever come to Rockhampton. In fact all the obstacles, all the logic, would have been placed in his way. But this simply reminds me of the saying that logic is a systematic way of arriving at the wrong conclusion with precision.
The text for my address comes from Proverbs 29, 18: ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’, or, if you prefer the words of Confucius, “If you don’t know where you are going, you will probably end up someplace else”. In other words, he who aims at nothing, usually hits it. Thus, as we gather here, I ask you to take advantage of the opportunity presented by this conference to think deeply about your organisations, about your roles in your organisations, and most importantly, about yourselves. What is your personal agenda, your vision, your mission, your purpose in life?

I would then like you to think about the role and mission of Institutional Research in your organisation; (i.e. what is the ‘business’ of the business of IR) and then about your organisation’s role; what is its compelling vision; what are its distinctive competencies, its competitive edge? It is sad to see so many organisations attempting to do so many things poorly.

As a higher education administrator in the halcyon days of funding for higher education some fifteen years ago, I could see problems ahead. I convened a national seminar in Hobart to help people begin to plan for a better future for their organisations. This conference, ‘The Need for a Managerial Revolution in Tertiary Institutions’, attracted some 150 people from the higher education and TAFE sectors around Australia. The following are some of the things I said then: ‘Today’s institutions must develop a comprehensive planning and management system to enable them to:

- identify and define their goals more explicitly than they have in the past
- to plan and control the limited resources which will be allocated to them
- to provide the reporting capabilities required by the Australian Parliament, the Tertiary Education Commission and societal and economic pressures for accountability.’

On the important matter of statements, I quoted Derek Bok, President of Harvard University, from Harvard’s 1971 -72 annual report:

Any institution that cannot articulate its purpose is forever vulnerable to the outside world on which it ultimately relies for its existence. The support given to colleges must depend on cogent reasons, rather than tradition or convenience, and colleges can supply such reasons only if they are able to provide a compelling statement on what they are attempting to do for their students and other stakeholders.

Let me now ask you whether your institution’s mission statement is a compelling one? Or, is it almost indistinguishable from those of other universities and colleges? Does your mission statement meet the ‘turn-on test’? Does it turn you on when you think about it, or do you merely say that it’s good enough for, say, Canberra or Wellington?

I concluded my 1975 address by saying that if tertiary institutions were to receive a fair share of the fiscal pie, they must define their missions more explicitly than they have in the past, and that failure to do so is tantamount to conceding that the very institution which is supposed to foster intelligent behaviour in others is not acting intelligently itself.

Six years later, I gave the keynote address at the 1981 AITEA national conference, Planning for Excellence versus the Survival Syndrome. I opened by stating that many tertiary institutions were determined merely to survive regardless of what this did to their academic standards. I expressed the view that higher education leaders were concentrating on administrivia and short-term issues, whilst ignoring long-term issues. I went on to state that the road to survival is through the market place.

Incidentally, I was asked by the AITEA conference organisers to make some predictions for the 1980s. Now, I do not believe in forecasts. Let me remind you of the four laws of forecasting. Law (1) says that it’s very difficult to forecast, especially about the future. Law (2) says that he or she who lives by the crystal ball soon learns to eat ground glass. Law (3) says that the moment you forecast, you know that you are going to be wrong -you just don’t know by how much and in which direction. Law (4), which I like best of all, says that if you’re ever right, never let them forget it. Nevertheless, the following summarises my best
‘guesstimates’ at the time, for the 1980s. These ‘guesstimates’ were reproduced in the October 1981 AITEA Journal.¹

For the economy as a whole: high unemployment including the nasty side-effects of rising youth unemployment; a high rate of inflation; tight monetary policies; increasing pressure for high quality of life and shorter working hours, resulting in industrial confrontation; low rate of population growth; increasing use of technology; uneven distribution of leisure; more spare time for many who will not know what to do with it; and less time for some (including those who attend conferences) to get to know their families.

For tertiary institutions in particular: increasing public disenchantment with tertiary education; stable enrolment for some institutions and declining enrolments for others; more mergers, takeovers and closures; lower morale due to reduced funds and promotional opportunities; more militant staff associations; more time and funds expended in the battle for warm bodies; decline in academic standards; and finally intense and unhealthy rivalry between departments for a piece of the shrinking financial cake (that is, shared poverty), and rivalry between tenured and untenured faculty.

Whilst I do not believe in forecasting, I believe that the more we discuss the uncertainties of the future, the less uncertain the future becomes. I concluded with a plea for leadership, and paraphrasing my paper to the 1981 conference,² I said that I saw one major problem or opportunity facing tertiary education and that was STRONG LEADERSHIP. In other words, we need leaders who can lead with creativity, initiative, imagination, and daring; who will foster cooperation rather than turn a blind eye to conflict between departments; who will assist academics to focus attention on maintaining academic excellence rather than on short run survival; who will convince staff that it is better for their departments to be smaller and academically superior rather than larger but academically inferior. We need leaders who, in the words of Cyert, can develop policies that will counteract the debilitating tendencies of contraction, who can win back public confidence for tertiary education, and who will be actively involved in the strategic planning process of their institutions not just once every three years, but as a continuing process. Finally, we need leaders who will be actively involved in executive development programs for both themselves and their staff.

More recently, I delivered an address on ‘Managerial Vision’ at the 1988 AITEA National Conference. I had just completed a survey of strategic planning in universities. Having asked for their strategic plans and their mission statements, I had concluded that vice-chancellors and directors seemed to be looking over each other’s shoulders in developing their strategic plans, instead of entering boldly into the market place and carving a niche for themselves. It is sad to see so many tertiary institutions doing the same things, trying to be all things to all people. If you are serious about strategic planning, you define your niche rather than try to do many things poorly. In my 1988 address, I said that the ‘White Paper’ on higher education provided chief executives with a wonderful opportunity to lead their staff in the development of a vision for their institutions. I believed that the White Paper was calling for a diversity of institutions, not the conformity and sameness which I was beginning to see, particularly in the race for ‘warm bodies’. I said that institutions needed creative leaders who together with their colleagues could develop a compelling vision of a desired state of affairs for their organisations. For me, addressing the future is an exercise of the imagination in which we try to outwit future events. The future is a conscious dream, a set of imaginative hypotheses groping toward whatever utopias be at the heart of our consciousness. A strategic plan which is vision driven, rather than crisis driven, is the answer.

I distinguished between strategic planning and operational planning. Strategic planning is concerned with direction, with questions like: Where should my organisation be heading? Strategic planning is qualitatively focused on the future; it is intuitive, instinctive, subjective, inductive, idealistic and emotional. In short, strategic planning is about vision. It is a creative process. On the other hand, operational planning is an analytical process concerned with answering the question: How do I bring my

² Ibid, p. 130.
vision into reality? It is quantitatively focused on today, and is objective, deductive, scientific, past-orientated and pragmatic.

I concluded my 1988 address by offering the good news that the higher education scene is fraught with opportunities.

That brings me to ask, where do we go from here? To the 21st Century, of course! However, before we embark on our journey, let us review what the 1980s brought us. The 1980s brought us some ‘goodies’ and some ‘baddies’. I’ll let you decide which are which! We have the ‘yuppies’, the ‘walkman’, video-tapes and VCRs, data-banks, Fax machines, compact discs, automatic teller machines, the micro-wave oven, and test-tube babies. The 1980s also brought us escalating growth, the push to increase market share at any price, avarice and greed, the abandonment of personal and corporate values, the rise of entrepreneurs, banks offering money to entrepreneurs with little attention to ability to repay debt, big Government and big spending, a high current account deficit and high foreign debt. The 1980s also saw the rise of the welfare state, mega-unions, air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution, and the ‘me generation’ at ease.

The gap between Australia and New Zealand has widened in the last decade. Australia has a huge and growing financial resources gap, primarily because we are spending much more than our earnings. Our capital investment needs greatly outstrip our savings whilst our huge overseas debt is crippling us. Forty percent of export - earned income goes towards servicing the national debt. On the other hand, the Pacific Rim countries in South-East and North-East Asia have taken the lead. There has been an awesome shift in world power. The coming of the Asian era is as certain as the Mediterranean, European and American eras of the past. The Asian economies are growing at nearly double the rate of the OECD countries including Australia. Asian economic growth has exceeded that of the rest of the world by two percent each year for the past 25 years. Asia’s new dynamism is based on key factors which Australia largely lacks.

The characteristics of the Asian economies include high productivity and a clear commitment to growth, a claim and reward for excellence and creativity, high rates of local savings and foreign investment, rapid innovation and creation of new ideas and products, knowledge of each other’s social, economic and political systems, ways of thinking and doing things, and finally a dynamic export orientation which enables quick responses to meet and shape Western consumer needs. We in Australia and New Zealand have advantages such as political stability. However, these are squandered by greed, lower productivity, parochial attitudes, and an aversion to excellence by many managers, unions and educators. These trends explain why the Asian Pacific-Rim countries now dominate in the evolution of the world economy toward the 21st Century. Simply put, these countries will drive the creation of new ideas and wealth in the world and will largely determine Australia’s economic and social well being for the next few generations.

At a recent seminar in New York, a spokesman for Japan’s foreign ministry was asked what Japan is going to do with its economic power. “Double it”, was the reply. Japan’s dominance may give way to that of Korea, Malaya, Indonesia or China. However, whether or not Japan’s economy is overtaken, the Asian economies will power the 1990s into the 21st Century. For us in Australia and New Zealand, they represent an irresistible force for economic and social change. The benefit which Australia and New Zealand gain from participating in that change will depend on the quality of leadership in our homes, organisations, professions, and our countries as a whole. The once rich ‘lucky country’ needs more than our tradition of freedom or a vision of a new Asian-Pacific civilization. Behind our reluctance to be creative and productive, behind our boast of national pride, there seems to be a vacuum of national purpose, a lack of a national vision. We do not have a compelling vision of our country, or of our organisations. We need the confidence and self-esteem that fuels creativity and productivity.

If you are serious about being an excellent executive, IR manager, corporate planning officer, or whatever it is you choose to be, then you must act with enthusiasm, and go about the business of your business with a passion, vision, commitment and enthusiasm which is so obvious that people want to follow you. Leadership is not standing behind your staff and pushing them forward, leadership is standing in front with a vision. Like a magnet, you must attract people and make them want to follow you.
If you are serious about being an excellent executive, you must also have positive self-esteem, self-respect, self-image, and above all a positive mental attitude. You cannot expect your staff to respect you unless you respect yourself first. If you simply demand their respect, it will be obvious to them that you do not command your own respect. Let’s extend the thought a little further. You cannot expect your staff to greet customers with a friendly smile unless you do; in other words, there must be congruence between what you ask your staff to do, and what you do yourself. In essence, people hear what we say, but believe what we do.

If you want to know the answer to the poor productivity in our offices, factories, universities and schools, then don’t go beyond the word ‘integrity’. Values are all-important. We tell our staff to be proud to belong to our organisations. Don’t forget however, that you too must be proud to belong to your organisation. Employees, the people who either make our dreams come true or sabotage them, are becoming increasingly cynical about organisations which do not act in keeping with their statements of values. Values are not ‘taught’, they are ‘caught’. Values determine our beliefs, and these in turn determine our behaviour. More importantly, our values determine our mission in life.

Many organisations in recent years seem to have abandoned their values to search for more market share at any price. Managers are saying, “Don’t tell me how you met your sales target (or your student target), I’m just glad that you got your numbers”. Competition can bring out the best in products and services, but sadly, often the worst in people.

People who respect themselves will respect others. Many organisations are not achieving their vision because of senior executives who do not respect themselves. In my experience, successful people have a strong internal focus of control, a clear value system, and a strong self concept. They are clear about what they believe in and where they are going. It we are serious about turning our organisations around, about turning our country around, then we should take some time to consider ourselves.

Here is an exercise which I would like you to undertake. It involves a ‘ride in a helicopter’, and this is why. If you remain on terra firma you tend to get a limited perspective of your future, a limited perspective of IR’s role in your organisation, and a limited perspective of your organisation’s future. On the other hand, if you are prepared to jump into a helicopter and rise above the ordinary, remove your blinkers and raise your sights, you’ll be able to see yourself in perspective. As you rise higher you will be able to see IR’s role in relation to other functions that make up your organisation. Rise a little higher, and see your organisation’s role in relation to the whole of the tertiary education sector. Rise still higher, and see the tertiary sector in relation to the other sectors which make up the economy. Rise even higher, and see your country in relation to the other Pacific-Rim countries, and finally the global village.

(Small group exercise)

A problem and an opportunity are different sides of the same coin. I am not saying that you do not have any problems, because I recognise that we live and work in the real world. However, one must rise and look at a problem in perspective. For example, when Iran a creative leadership workshop for 24 senior Japanese executives, I put them into four syndicate groups and asked them to identify the weaknesses of Japan. They agreed. that the major weakness of Japan was lack of natural resources. I then asked them to identify the strengths of Japan and they agreed that this same factor, lack of natural resources, was the major strength of Japan! By hindering Japan in becoming the major automobile manufacturer of the world, it forced Japan to convert that weakness into a strength.

But this is the world of Business. How about Education? In a recent exercise, a group of people from a major metropolitan university (including the Vice-Chancellor) identified, as their institution’s major strength, their central city campus location which meant ready transportation access - an advantage over so many others. Ironically, other universities of that metropolitan region all identified this same campus location as the major weakness of that university. If you remain within your own boundaries, you tend to get a myopic view of your problems. On the other hand if you step back, (I prefer to use the expression, ‘rise above the ordinary’) you can see your problems in perspective. I would like you to do an exercise which will get you to do so.
All too often, when a problem comes across our desk, we look at it with a magnifying glass (something which we all carry around our necks like an albatross) and we say, “Oh, what a problem”. When the next problem comes across our desk we bring it closer and say once more, “Oh, what a problem”. Finally, we lose all perspective, and suffer from what I call strategic myopia. I would like you to pretend that you were not around when they were handing around magnifying glasses, but were around instead when they were handing around helicopters. In other words, I want you to rise above the ordinary. The greatest insights and advances in creativity have been at the interface between IR departments and finance departments, between IR departments and academic schools.

I ask you again, what is the real business of your business, what is your compelling vision for your organisation, and what is the compelling vision for IR in your organisations. As you have probably gathered, I’m deliberately forcing you to think. To get a vision of the Pacific Rim, please take one sheet of paper, place your organisation in a paddock somewhere in the middle of this paper, and then slowly rise above the ordinary. As you step back from your institutions, and slowly rise higher and higher, what do you see?

(Further small group exercise.)

In some instances, the neighbouring paddock could be a competitor. In other instances, that same neighbour can form a strategic alliance. Feel free to use your imagination in completing the exercise. You have a far better view of the horizon from up there in your helicopters than if you remain on terra firma. Feel free to add more paddocks, because there are some that are so easy to miss out. When you discuss and pool your ideas with your colleagues you can get a better, more comprehensive picture. Realise that we are part of a global village, and that anything we do in our institutions impacts on the rest of the world. Our graduates will go around the world. It’s thus important that we see the ‘big picture’ and think of strategic alliances, of what is beyond the horizon.

(End of exercise)

The price of excellence is eternal vigilance. It is so easy to relax, to become complacent. However, we should be scanning the environment constantly. So many organisations are rigid in their ways. Vision leaders do not change with the times, but change ahead of the time. Indeed, they change the times, because they have developed bi-focal vision. With the top half of their glasses they are focusing on the distant gate, on the light on the hill, whilst with the bottom half of their glasses they are focusing on the issues on their desk. Too many executives spend the bulk of their time solving problems, and lose the horizon.

Suppose you are trying to herd sheep from one paddock to another. If you just focus on the distant gate, the gate through which you would ultimately like to herd the sheep, the sheep will disappear from under your feet. On the other hand if you spend all of your time looking at your sheep, you will miss your destination. Thus, you need bi-focal vision, balancing your time between long run vision and short run objectives. The more time you devote to developing fire prevention measures (i.e. vision), the less time you need to devote tomorrow to putting out bush fires. Whilst some bushfires must be put out now, don’t spend all of your time putting out bushfires. You must lead with a vision.

We are all ‘chief executive officers’ at our respective levels in our organisations. ‘CEO’ stands not only for Chief Executive Officer, but also for Chief Energizing Officer, Chief Enthusiasm Officer. You must encourage and enliven those whom you wish to lead. When we walk about our organisation, we should act like leaders, and send out a message of excellence. Before we open our mouths, we should have already sent a message to both our subordinates and our peers.

This is where bi-focal vision comes in. It’s easy to say that it’s DEET’s fault, the Vice-Chancellors fault, or someone else’s fault. However, we are all leaders (and followers) in our respective levels in our organisations. Thus, if you have responsibility for managing or influencing people, it is incumbent on you to (a) have a vision, and (b) articulate that vision in a way which will ‘turn people on’. You cannot ‘turn people on’ unless you are ‘turned on’ yourself, unless you are a living example of the values, vision, and
mission of your organisation. Whether or not your organisation has a vision, as long as you have a small staff of people to lead, then you must lead with a vision. Each one of us has a part to play. We cannot wait for that national vision, or else we will be waiting indefinitely. If each one of us leaves this conference with a personal vision, a personal mission and a personal action plan, we can make a difference.

I refuse to accept strategic planning assignments unless the organisation is prepared to start with the basics. A major Australian company recently asked me to develop a strategic plan and mission statement, but not to touch their value statement or vision statement. This clashed with my own value system. I do not think an organisation needs a vision statement; it must have a vision but this does not need to be articulated as a written statement. The organisation must have a mission statement which meets ‘the turn-on test’. Moreover, values are critical.

I asked each person to write down their personal values, because these determine one’s vision, which in turn determines the mission statement. In round one, people write down their values i.e. that which is important to them, - what they believe in. In round two, they prioritise their values. The top end values will be fundamental, and not negotiable. That is, you will not compromise on any of them to work for your organisation, if doing so means violating them. Any values below these involve a bit of give and take, a bit of negotiation.

Next, I asked them to write down those corporate values which, if their company adopted and practised, they would give it their ‘110 percent.’ They did this in four groups, then came back and on butcher’s paper shared their values. They told their chief executive, who participated, that if he adopted those values on the butcher’s paper, they would give their ‘110 percent’. He thereupon agreed to set aside the company’s existing statements, and because he could see enthusiasm amongst the group, wanted them to proceed and revise their vision statement. We proceeded next to develop a shared company vision (I don’t believe it necessary to have vision statements) to be the most successful business of their type in the world.

Let me now leave you with some homework.

If rule number one is “know thyself”, rule number two is, “whilst you remain on the pay roll of an organisation, know that organisation”. Just as an individual has values, so does an organisation. Its values determine its vision and its mission statement. The purpose of this exercise is to give those, who are serious about excellence, the opportunity to bring these two sets of values and vision into maximum congruence without violating their fundamental beliefs.

After you have co-operatively developed a set of values for each major stakeholder, you then proceed to develop a corporate vision and mission statement.

Many universities’ mission statements make the classic mistake of stressing what they do (e.g. research and teaching) rather than what they are about. Teaching and research are major strategies to achieve something. What is the something universities are about? In other words, the mission statement should state the business of the business of the organisation. For example, IBM is in the business of helping people solve problems. IBM is not in the business of manufacturing computers. Manufacturing computers, hardware and software may be their strategies, but it is not their mission.

After involving people, representative of all stakeholders, in developing a university’s mission statement, the various divisions, sections and departments should, with their staff, develop their vision and mission statement, goals, objectives and action plans.

Institutional Researchers have a vital role to play in helping their organisations prepare a strategic plan. You can make a significant difference to the quality of planning within your organisation.