

Feature

An interview with Jane den Hollander, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

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Co-editor John Clarke interviewed Professor den Hollander on 12 November, 2010 at the Melbourne Campus of Deakin University at Burwood. A synthesis of the interview and selected highlights are presented here. Professor den Hollander subsequently updated and approved this collation of her views prior to publication.

Please cite this interview as:

Clarke, J.A. (2011). Interview with Jane den Hollander, Deakin University. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 2(1). 1–7. doi: 10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i1.70

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Biography



Professor Jane den Hollander commenced as Vice-Chancellor and President of Deakin University on 19 July, 2010.

Prior to taking up this appointment, Professor den Hollander was Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. She had overall strategic and financial responsibility for the University's four Faculties (Business; Health; Humanities; and Science and Engineering) and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies.

Professor den Hollander also held the roles of Pro Vice-Chancellor Academic Services and General Manager Student and Staff Services at Curtin.

Professor den Hollander is currently a board member of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. From 2005-2008, she was a Board member of Graduate Careers Australia, appointed by Universities Australia. She sits on numerous national committees mostly concerned with higher education issues.

Professor den Hollander holds a BSc (Honours) First Class in Zoology and a Master of Science degree from Wits University, Johannesburg. Her PhD is from the University of Wales, Cardiff.¹

¹ This bibliographical material was extracted from information retrieved on January 13, 2011, from <http://www.deakin.edu.au/vice-chancellor/biography.php>

Thinking back to your first year at university

I remember my first year, very much. My parents were not university educated. My father was a miner. We were not peripatetic but we lived in a lot of places, settled in a small mining town, in Carletonville, right in the middle of the gold fields in South Africa, at the heart of apartheid South Africa. My mother helped me with the application forms. It was a big endeavour, and I went to Wits in Johannesburg. Jo'burg was about, I suppose, 150 miles from where I lived so I had to go into a residence and that was an interesting experience in itself.

The university I went to was a privileged university in those days but one that took a particular oppositional stance with the government and was quite vociferous in its criticisms. I went into a great all-girls residence with lots of very wealthy people who would have come from very different backgrounds to my own. Of course, it was quite fabulous getting into the social life of Jo'burg, the time of my life. But I was as poor as a church mouse. I remember my mother gave me 7.50 Rands a month for spending money, which many of my girlfriends would have in a day and it was quite challenging getting used to that. I went home in the holidays and worked.

My first semester was a real challenge, just getting to understand what a university was about, not having any familiarity and knowing absolutely no-one. I knew not one person in the university when I went there.

In my view, education is a means to a different way of thinking and most people truly believe that education is transformational

The first year was quite a blur and then at the beginning of my second year I did this unit about cell physiology ... everything changed because I actually got it and, you know, he was a very, very good teacher and he showed me what the possibilities might be.

The person I am now is a consequence of my experiences at university—the people I met, I learned about apartheid in ways that

I had never, ever considered and it changed my world view. That happened in my first and second year at university and that's a very, very important thing for me and for my whole family. My younger sister went to

university; she's a professor in the United States now. Our children will be educated, their health and well-being for generations of our family is now secure because of education. That's important.

On Bradley and Higher Education Reform

Most people believe that if you educate the people, they'll be better for it.

Bradley wrote from the perspective of a sector she had experienced. The data in the Bradley Report showed the link between education and productivity, the link between education and national wealth, and that people mostly believe widening participation in higher education is a very good thing. My personal belief is that the absolute basis of a just and fair society is that everybody has access to good education and good health services. What's unfortunate is that everybody thinks it's a good thing but not everybody is prepared

to fund what is needed to get that quite significant expansion. ... Universities are not an election issue, never have been, will they ever be?

On challenges associated with widening participation

The challenges are unbelievable. The evidence from the UK shows that it's actually quite hard to change aspirations. It's hard to get people's attention and we're going to have to get the attention of families and generations of families who've never considered education, or higher education, as part of their destiny. We will start to see students who, up until now, never had aspirations for education because culturally we've always closed it off at a certain point—if you don't get a [tertiary entrance score] of X, you can't come. We've told people that for years and years and years and years.

And it's really tough work for an academic to stand in front of a class where there's a diversity of academic preparedness. If we don't worry about those things, what we'll do is we'll attract increasing numbers and we'll fail them immediately and confirm for the next 10 generations why they should never come.

If we accept students, we have obligations to make sure that we get them up to speed on their preparedness for a robust higher education experience quickly. I don't think we should lower the standards, I think we should bring them up to standard. If we accept someone, we have an obligation to say, "All things being equal, we believe you

can graduate." And if there are interventions required to ensure that that happens, at least in the first year—then we should do them. Often, these are expensive interventions but we must do this in order to meet with the intent and spirit of Bradley, which is to improve access, improve participation. We have to widen participation properly so that people do end up with a qualification which does help them transform their lives for themselves and for their families and future generations.

Maintaining standards is another challenge. If someone can't make the standard, we have to say "no, this is not for you." A university education, particularly one that is standards referenced, may not be the right choice for every member of the population.

Widening participation will bring with it increasing diversity and the associated issues of variation in the level of academic preparedness

I feel quite confounded by the enormity of resourcing these challenges. We must grow our research, we must keep our capacity to create new knowledge robust and we must compete internationally against the very best, and improve. The scholarship of our teaching needs to improve as well and we have to support all of these aims. That's going to be quite tough. We will need to find smarter ways of doing things, being remorselessly more efficient in our own administration and bureaucracy. Philanthropy is becoming increasingly important as a way to offset some of the costs. These are interesting times as they say.

On the value of intervention programs

If you increase retention by five per cent, it's millions of dollars saved, and just churning that into operations is very useful. That's certainly one of the targets we use here. If people are leaving for reasons that have nothing to do with us, then we should support them while they leave and enable them to come back when they're ready to study. But we shouldn't be pleased about anyone leaving and being disappointed in the experience they're getting with us.

We need to be inclusive in who we choose but we must remain absolutely firm about our standards.

simplify what they do, we need to be much clearer in our language and communicate in the language of the society because we don't—we think we do but we don't—and I think we need to start thinking about what happens in the years before you get to university. I've heard many people say it's not for universities to go into schools and to do things but actually I think maybe we should start thinking about how we do that and who we do it with. I don't think we go in on the white charger but we do need to think how we work with local governments, with communities and what we do in schools, particularly in the early years, around the benefits of what we in our sector can do.

On good first-year programs

I think we've got to actively manage academic under-preparedness. Now, that's no different from my early work in disability services where, in developing approaches and resources to cater for the diversity, we improved everybody's experience. Why wouldn't you have a point where you assessed everyone and then you managed the cohorts differently, working to everyone's ability, and I don't mean streaming in the old pejorative sense. We've not quite done this yet. We also need to be very careful of our own middle class attitudes and how we deal with the cultural experiences of many of our students, the diversity is enormous. The cultural differences are enormous. We need to take those into account.

I think there's a lot of work to be done around preparedness. Universities need to

In first year we need to seriously consider cohort management for those who need it. I would hate to think that we'd standardised first year into one way of making sure that everybody had the required competency boxes ticked! I don't see it like that.

Universities are about higher education, we need to remember that.

Students should be able to have a good community, cultural, intellectual experience; the very, very best that we can give them. The thing I often find at the moment as I read prospectuses, is that we do over-promise the most ridiculous things and you wonder why we do that.

Looking forward five years

I would hope in five years time we will have achieved the targets—definitely the 40% (bachelors degree) and having 20% of the cohort coming from low socioeconomic

areas. I would hope that there are very significant inroads in those areas of the country where participation is low. However, the use of postcode as a definition of academic disadvantage is a terrible one. We need to look at what we mean by academic disadvantage—the social, financial and other aspects—and be honest about it. I have some concerns there. In five years time we should be confident that the cohort we needed to pay attention to has actually received an education and that we've not, by some unintended consequence, just widened participation for those who can have it anyway; Hopefully we will have made an inroad into areas where there was no participation.

I hope that in five years time we will see changes in articulation across the sectors, between VET schools, and the VET sector and universities. Will there be those stark dividers or will we have become more seamless? I think that will be interesting.

I don't think TEQSA² will specifically endorse teaching only universities at all, but hopefully they will make comments about standards in particular areas if institutions aren't meeting them. That's a good thing.

Everybody knows that a nation's well-being is measured by the quality and the success of its universities and therefore we are important. But we don't have political clout—higher education/universities are

not a vote getter—nobody's that interested until afterwards, when the dust settles. Australian education built an interesting brand, a good brand, and here we're sitting in quite difficult territory. International is looking tough. TEQSA is an unknown; deregulation is a game changer for some; the ALTC³ abolition has been a blow, mostly for the terrible signal it has sent. Interesting times all around.

Messages to leave with us

One needs to be careful not to draw on one's own experience. I was a first-year student quite a long time ago and I think I need to be careful not to draw on that. What you can draw on is, I think, the experience of the unknown, of how one deals with the unknown, and making sure that we start to diminish ignorance or explain those parts of the university that might be foreign or different to other people.

Inclusive environments are what universities should create and the only aspect we become exclusive on is the measure of the intellect and we enable those students to go as far as they can with what they do. Encouraging our own undergraduates to take on further study, meaningful further study, with good research and good supervision, is going to be one of our very big challenges over the next while. There's a lot of competition for their skills out in non-university land.

... and making sure that we articulate students seamlessly into what are quite mystical university operations.

² The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, a national body for regulation and quality assurance. (Eds.)

³ The Australian Learning and Teaching Council. (Eds.)

For me, first year certainly changed my life. I was talking to some students just this last week and one of them said to me that coming to Deakin changed the way she was thinking. And I was really pleased and I thought: “She’s had an education because she actually understands that she thinks about the world slightly differently to when she got here.” And that’s our challenge, that people leave and we know that we’ve touched them in some way and we’ve altered their world view to something that is more informed and which engages and energises them to go and do other things.

It has to start in first year. How do we make sure that even though the base is much wider and more diverse, that every student has an inclusive, interesting learning experience? That’s very important to me. If you get that right in first year, the rest goes very well indeed. How students do in second and third year is entirely up to the individual. And my experience has been that if the make it into second year they mostly do very well. But how we get them there is very important.

The other thing I think we all need to remember is the next generation’s going to live to—what do you think?—120, health care being what it is? I wonder why we rush everything so much. We need to be more flexible about how people leave and come back to their learning and how we make it accessible to people at different stages of their own life as we go forward. I think universities will be very different places in another generation. It’s not going

to be the exclusive playground of the very young school-leaver. It’s going to be a very different sort of playground.

Aspiration to Action; it should be from Aspiration to Graduation. But the real disaster is if we admit them and they just churn back out of the system never to return. It would be good to ensure that the student learning experience is meaningful for everyone, most especially those for who are breaking new ground for themselves and their families.

My real worry, my real, real worry is that we’ll admit all these people, some of them might get through but be disappointed by the experience, and that would be terrible, or unchanged by the experience, that would be a failure.