Response to Review of Strategic Plan

This response is submitted by the Auckland Branch of the Association of University Staff.

General

Our desire is and always has been to see improvement in the way the University functions and what it achieves. We seek to participate fully in the development of strategic plans directed towards this goal, through cooperation with the Council and administration. In doing so we seek constantly to redefine our institutional goals through quasi-democratic processes. Our goals must accurately reflect the humanitarian, pedagogical and intellectual motivations and aspirations of those who work at the University, and of the community we serve.

Our review of the Strategic Plan and the consequences of its implementation so far is strongly critical, but this should be seen in the context of our opposition to the corporatisation of universities and the accompanying disempowerment of staff that has increasingly marked the last fifteen years or so.

It is now apparent that the corporate, competitive model of behaviour, which was first thrust upon universities by government but subsequently enthusiastically adopted by those in positions of power within the institutions, has obscured any true path to the goal of "excellence" (previously "quality"). These terms have become politically expedient catchwords that are so often used devoid of any real meaning that they can no longer have any prominent place in the planning of a university worth the name.

We do not believe that the measures of performance used to demonstrate success in the operation of the University are valid. To be valid they would first have to be agreed upon by duly appointed and elected bodies, like the Senate and Faculties, which hold mandates form the staff and students whom they serve, to make judgments and decisions of that sort. However, the Senate and Faculties of the University have been dispossessed of their proper powers in order to create fiefdoms for executive deans who, driven largely by financial considerations, make decisions of moment without any real reference to the well-informed desires and concerns of the intelligent and dedicated staff who work within functional units of the institution.

This state of affairs has resulted in the establishment of a completely artificial set of criteria for measuring success. In fact, there seems to be more concern with measurement and playing an image-and-numbers game than there is with providing staff with the resources, in terms of material means, time, and conditions of employment, that they need to do a good job according to their own sound judgment. Many currently fashionable performance indicators are vacuous and open to manipulation.

Our desire to see improvement in the way the University functions and what it achieves is undiminished. We are willing to cooperate with the Council and the administration to redefine our institutional goals through quasi-democratic processes of the sort that become a fully-fledged university.

We have consistently opposed the "bums-on-seats" accounting mentality (Hon. Dr. Michael Cullen, Hazard, 29 June 2006 – reproduced below) that universities across the country have
embraced and used as an excuse for squandering educational resources on advertising and branding in competition with one another. We now call on The University of Auckland to abandon its current drive to be "Number One" and concentrate on what is really worth doing properly for its own sake without reference to an implicit notion of "The Best University in New Zealand". Rather than pursuing the ultimately destructive quest to become The Best, we should be developing strategies to help provide and be an integrated part of the best university sector our country can afford; and to ensure that "best" continues to be defined in terms of equity, empowerment, engagement and ethical concerns, as well as intellectual and creative pursuits.

Our specific comments are set out in relation to the themes and numbered objectives of the Strategic Plan, taking into account the contents of the document Strategic Plan 2005 – 2012, One year on: progress and initiatives

**International standing**

We are fully in favour of leading staff learning from the experience of others in the international community, but we deplore the replacement of sound and thoughtful judgment by the identification of pseudo-objective measures of things that depend, in the end, on subjective values. Therefore, we seriously question the value of the Future Heads and General Staff Leaders spending their time trying to identify characteristics of excellence for the purpose of understanding international ranking systems.

We note that the Times Higher Education Supplement’s ranking of The University of Auckland rose from 67th in 2004 to 52nd in 2005.

But we note also that this survey establishes its rankings by appealing to university staff, even offering financial enticements to participate (see Appendix II). Staff are likely to feel it is in their greatest interest to rank their own institution more highly than others. This means the results of the survey and any apparent change in ranking are highly questionable, and that a high ranking has no real intrinsic value in any case. We are vehemently opposed to the evaluation of the University according to the outcome of such PR competitions.

**Objective 1:** Establish The University of Auckland, New Zealand’s premier research university, as a peer of the world’s leading autonomous universities through association and collaboration, and by an active presence in the international academic community.

We support the full and active participation of University staff in the international academic and research communities and we applaud the success of the University in forging links and entering into cooperative agreements with other universities, both in New Zealand and overseas.

**Research and Creative Work**

**Objective 3:** Achieve a PBRF ratio of A:B:C:R rated researchers working at the University of 20:50:22:8 through the development of a high quality research environment.

We do not believe that a high quality research environment should be developed for the purposes of achieving certain results in evaluations made by the Tertiary Education Commission. The requirement on many staff during the first semester of 2006 to produce
and modify PBRF Evidence Portfolios using the quite troublesome RIMS software has undermined the vibrancy of the university's research environment by distracting staff from real research opportunities. Whatever PBRF ratio is finally achieved, it will apparently be at the expense of a high quality research environment, not through its development.

We fully support the increase in assistance to new and emerging researchers but we do not agree with expenditure focused on generating research profile rather than the merits of the research itself. We oppose the diversion of funds intended to support actual teaching or research into administrative measures aimed at making staff comply with demands for self-aggrandisement.

Much greater effort needs to go into ensuring that academic staff workloads allow extended periods for undisturbed research time.

Teaching and Learning

The Strategic plan states that "Our major aim in the period 2005 to 2012 is to improve the University's international standing through the enhancement of the quality of our teaching and learning, our research, and the support systems that underpin these activities."

Improving the University's international standing should not be a major aim. If our international standing improves as a result of how we conduct our teaching, learning, research and support activities, then so be it, but our eye should first be on what we do, not what is being said about us overseas. Furthermore, we should be evaluating in very concrete terms what we do, not trying to perceive its "quality" with a view to enhancing that abstract property, one step removed from the physical reality of our actual work.

Objective 7: Achieve a high quality student body with an annual growth rate of equivalent full-time students of 1% composed as follows: 78% in undergraduate, 12% in taught postgraduate and 10% in research postgraduate programmes.

Steps taken that relate to this objective include provision of additional scholarships, and an increase to stipends, and investigations into other 'packages of support' for graduate students. While we generally support the provision of student scholarships, we are opposed to rises in student fees. We wish to see a clear demonstration of the complete separation of the revenue steams that take money from one group of students and give money out to another group of students. Subsidizing university education for graduate students at the expense of undergraduate students is intrinsically unfair and would seem to go against the goal of "encouraging students to reach their full potential" especially in view of the economic and historical factors that often bear on students' initial success (or lack thereof).

The other main strategy employed is said to be marketing, communications and publicity with emphasis on the development of better communication materials, and a brand positioning exercise. We oppose the high levels of expenditure on the public image ("brand") of the University. The attempted manipulation of public perception by using methods favoured in the commercial sector is inimical to the academic foundations of the University.

The quality of teaching and learning cannot be measured in annual growth rates of the student body. An increase in student numbers without an attendant increase in teaching staff speaks to a decline in the provision of the fundamental factors that promote good teaching and learning: the time and opportunity for student and teacher to forge relationships where
teachers are able to understand the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and provide for these, and students are able to relate to their teachers as role-models who are enthusiastically engaged with what they teach.

The perceived need to recruit good students indicates a potential inability to create good students, which would be the true hallmark of excellent teaching and learning.

Objective 8: Create a curriculum meeting the highest standards of excellence across the University.

The new structure for academic programmes has created a significant change in the curriculum. The change to 120 points per EFTS is said to align University of Auckland with the majority of other tertiary qualifications offered in New Zealand – and the introduction of General Education requirements is said to be aimed at producing graduates with flexibility, critical thinking skills, and an appreciation and understanding of fields outside of their usual area of study.

It seems premature to call the new curriculum structure a success. This change created a huge additional workload, by necessitating the rewriting and restructuring of virtually every taught course at the university.

The strategies adopted for reducing course content have not always led to a reduction in student workloads; what it has meant is that students have fewer hours available to schedule special support tutorials and workshops such as those run by the Tuākana programme. This has had an impact on programmes aimed at achieving equity.

Community Engagement

Objective 11: Develop effective partnerships with the University's local, national and international communities.

We have some residual concerns that the 2006 Future Heads and General Staff Leaders Programme effort to define and suggest measures of 'engagement' for a research-led university will ignore the work of some staff who are already engaged with local and national communities in low profile, non-revenue-generating roles. It must be recognised that much valuable work is done by way of charitable exercise in which staff's University role is acknowledged even though the institution itself has no direct involvement. That is simply the character of university work as opposed to corporate work.

Objective 12: Engage alumni and friends in mutually supportive and productive relationships.

Although the recording and reporting of endowments held by the University and Foundation and planning for the University's Jubilee Campaign are important activities, engagement with alumni and friends of the University should not always be associated with fundraising drives.

Excellent People

Objective 13: Recruit and retain a high-quality staff and student body that draws upon the widest possible pool of talent.
Promoting university work as an attractive career choice would best be achieved by investigating and addressing the structural problems that exist in the relationships between staff, their heads of department and senior managers.

The difficulties in attracting staff to academic leadership and headship positions are likely to persist as long as those who take on such positions find themselves being micro-managed by more powerful deans. The Strategic Plan should have specific objectives related to the improvement of working conditions and staff morale.

**Objective 15:** Create a culture that encourages academic and general staff to reach their full potential.

While the establishment of a Staff and Organisational Development Unit within Human Resources is positive, we would caution that such a unit must recognise the legitimate autonomy of departments and individual staff members. The University will function much better when staff themselves are able to have the greatest say in the formulation of goals, work programmes and organisational structures.

A number of factors continue to contribute to the dissatisfaction of good staff and diminish the quality of staff achievements:

- Continual restructuring.
- Challenges to academic autonomy.
- Decline in resources available to departments.
- Increased pressure to teach outside normal hours.
- Avoidable, unwise enrolments in courses.
- Lack of departmental-level language-support systems.

**Resourcing and Organising for Quality**

**Objective 17:** Increase and diversify the University’s revenue

We applaud the cooperation between the Vice-Chancellors’ Committee and the joint unions that resulted in the securing of additional governmental funding to universities.

We do not agree with the selling of University courses as commodities overseas in order to open new markets, for example, in China and the Middle East. The primary responsibility of University staff is to provide education to students with adequate preparation, not the generation of revenue from students with minimal preparation just because they are willing to pay for participation in classes.

**Objective 18:** Provide an infrastructure that supports teaching, learning, research, and community engagement of the highest quality.
We recognise continuing improvements in the University's physical infrastructure, such as IT systems, but fear that this can obscure stasis, or deterioration even, in the quality of social and professional infrastructures. Staff have very few opportunities to improve their job satisfaction.

*We would be pleased to speak to our submission.*

Peter Wills  
Auckland Branch President  
Association of University Staff
APPENDIX I: Hanzard, 29 June 2006

Tertiary Education—Advertising and Marketing

2. METIRIA TUREI (Green) to the Minister for Tertiary Education: Is he concerned that on the same day that he announced a funding boost of $26 million for universities over the coming year, the New Zealand University Students Association revealed that in 2005 public tertiary education institutions spent an estimated collective total of $28 million on advertising and marketing?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN (Minister for Tertiary Education): Yes.

Metiria Turei: Does he find it frustrating that he is having to bail out universities to the tune of $26 million because those universities say they cannot pay their staff a fair wage, and some, indeed, are making cuts to staffing and to courses, yet those same institutions are spending more than $26 million on TV ads and stupid gimmicks?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: Yes; it underlines the stupidity of a funding system based on “bums on seats” and, therefore, advertising to attract those bums.

Moana Mackey: What reports has the Minister seen in relation to the $26 million funding boost?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: I have seen reports from a variety of stakeholders that welcomed the announcement, including the New Zealand University Students Association, which has lobbied me on behalf of the staff.

Hon Brian Donnelly: Can the Minister explain why a staff member teaching a degree programme at Auckland University of Technology should be paid 3 percent more than a teacher of a similar degree at Unitec, simply because Max Bradford, for political purposes—and in his swansong—approved Auckland University of Technology’s application for university status?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: The last part of the statement is certainly correct, but this funding decision arose out of tripartite discussions between the Government, the vice-chancellors, and the Association of University Staff. Of course, therefore, it was a matter for the universities; Unitec is not a university.

Te Ururoa Flavell: Ka riro anō e ngā wānanga e toru, arā, Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, Te Wānanga o Raukawa me Te Wānanga o Aoteaora he pūtea e ērīte ana ki te pūtea ka tukuna ki ngā whare wānanga e waru; mēnā kāore, he aha ai?

[An interpretation in English was given to the House.]

[Will the three wānanga, Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, Te Wānanga o Raukawa, and Te Wānanga o Aoteaora, be receiving funding comparable to that of the eight universities; if not, why not?]

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: No. Only one of the wānanga has postgraduate qualifications of a standard that might be considered comparable with those of the universities. In any case, I repeat that this decision is a result of tripartite discussions between the universities, the Association of University Staff, and the Government. The problem here, of course, is attracting staff comparable with those overseas; that is not such a big issue in relation to the wānanga, it has to be said.

Metiria Turei: When the Minister’s Government announced its intention to invest $300 million a year in the interest-free student loan scheme, did he consider that because of the flawed competitive funding model, this public investment would be squandered on gimmicks to lure students, like the one that gives students a bottle of water from Victoria University, and comes with the message: “Your brain is 85 percent water. Give it a top-up.”—or perhaps that is just a cheap way of doing a Biology 101 lesson?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: Yes, but of course when Victoria University is trying to compete with Otago University, it has to use any gimmicks possible.

Moana Mackey: What is the Government doing about the funding model that forces institutions to spend so much on advertising and marketing?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: Cabinet is currently considering a review of the funding system, which will ensure that in the future institutions will focus on improving the quality and relevance of tertiary education rather than on chasing student numbers. Specifically, the new funding formula will also be related to, in part, the outcomes rather than the inputs. The numbers going in is the present basis for funding.

Metiria Turei: If the Minister really is committed to moving away from a “bums on seats” model for the tertiary sector, when will his Government lead by example, get its own members’ bums off their seats, and make the changes that need to be made to have a more collaborative and cooperative model for funding for tertiary institutions, and when can we see the results?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: Of course, in this place the number of bums on seats is very crucial; otherwise, one sits in different seats.
APPENDIX II: Solicitation to participate in THES ranking survey:

As Sir Richard Sykes, Rector of Imperial College comments 'Peer and recruiter review is an excellent way to evaluate the quality of a university at any level. You need smart people to recognise smart people.'

In the following survey, which should take no more than five minutes to complete on-line, you will be asked to identify the strengths of universities and university departments with which you have some familiarity.

Your responses will contribute towards an important research report, which will be made available to the heads of departments around the world. The report will cover trends in international graduate recruitment and the evaluation of university departments by international employers and peer faculty.

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The chance to win a Blackberry personal organiser (You must respond before 10 July 2006 to qualify for the Blackberry competition)

<http://surveys.topgraduate.com/times> surveys.topgraduate.com/times

Your responses will be used only in aggregate form and will remain strictly confidential.

Kind Regards,

Ben Sowter,
Head of Research
QS

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* The survey has been tested under both Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox. Javascript is recommended but not essential.

** QS Asia Pacific Professional Leaders in Education - Annual Conference and Exhibition, will take place for the second time in Singapore from 12-14 July 2006. Delegates will consist of managers and practitioners in all forms of regional and international education activity from Asia and from the rest of the world.

*** To meet the growing demand for international study World Grad School Tour assists faculty representatives to meet prospective students and to advise them on their suitability for specific programmes. The Tour visits 31 cities in 22 countries with particular focus on the highly popular Masters and PhD programmes at leading institutions. Over 150 leading universities from around the world will take part in 2006. Information on the whole spectrum of postgraduate study will be available at each fair. Beginning on the 30th August the Tour will visit Buenos Aires, Santiago, Bogota, Caracas, Mexico City, Kiev, Paris, Milan, Frankfurt, Berlin, Munich, Madrid, London, Thessaloniki, Athens, Istanbul, Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Delhi, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai, Colombo, Cairo. For complete dates and venues visit <http://www.topgraduate.com>www.topgraduate.com