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Driving change at Sydney

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Social inclusion is very much on the radar of the University of Sydney's vice-chancellor Dr Michael Spence, writes Julie Hare.

There is a saying that vice-chancellors of Group of Eight universities like to drag out when describing their august institutions: elite but not elitist. It's one that Dr Michael Spence, vice-chancellor of the University of Sydney, draws on often. It might be bordering on cliché, but it's about the only thing about Spence that is.

Nine months into his tenure at Australia's oldest, and some say snobbiest, institution, Spence is frantically busy delving into the detail of every aspect of the university - or what he calls his "work slate".

One change that is clearly in his sights is to improve the university's record in bringing in low-SES and indigenous students. While he won't divulge the detail - he is yet to finalise how Sydney will deal with the issue - there is little doubting his sincerity. He is quick to defend the university's track record - indeed it has some nationally recognised programs - he admits "we haven't been doing as well as we might".

Having spent the past 20 years at Oxford, the issue is very much on his mind. The UK's social inclusion policies predate the Rudd government's commitments by several years and in recent times the most elite - and elitist - of British universities have been under considerable pressure to increase their intake of students from government schools.

Having been at the coalface of bringing gifted students from poorer backgrounds into Oxford, where he was head of the Social Sciences Division, Spence says resolving the issue is nothing if not complex.

"The only way you can justify being an elite institution is if you are one that admits people from all social backgrounds. That is a pretty passionate commitment of mine because I've seen the transformative effects that education can have on the lives of young people," he says.

"We need to have a national conversation about whether it is socially equitable for the children of the wealthy to be educated at the expense of the poor.

"We need to think hard not just about how we assess educational attainment at the secondary level, but educational potential. We need to understand how we recognise that two different marks may actually mean the same educational attainment for two people from different social backgrounds without being unfair."

While aptitude testing is one area that is being looked at, staff at Sydney can rest assured he says the Oxford method of interviewing every single potential student is not. Oxford also taught Spence that scholarships are not a silver bullet either.

"We had one of the more generous scholarship schemes in the UK and we had difficulty in getting people to take up financial assistance. People who were already at the university who we knew qualified for the assistance and with whom we made contact many times still didn't take up the financial opportunity," says Spence.

"The sociology of disadvantage is very complicated. It was a great mystery, but the theory was that they were afraid of being labelled. These are tricky things."

Tricky, indeed. For instance, Oxford found students from poor backgrounds tended to prefer entrance exams over interviews because they understood the parameters and expectations. Several faculties at the university subsequently reintroduced aptitude tests.

Spence, whose research was in intellectual property theory, says that having returned to his alma mater from Oxford he is struck by a few quirks of the Australian system: first, the comprehensive nature of Australian universities ("we teach everything from astrophysics to jewellery making") and the oddities of the funding model.

"Australian universities are, as Denise Bradley pointed out, funded in a rather peculiar way. You lose money on research grants and you lose money on teaching expensive subjects - on some up to \$15,000 per student. So you cross-subsidise by the teaching of cheap subjects and full-fee paying students. That's not sustainable in the long term," he says.

The fact that Sydney has managed to increase its international competitiveness (it sneaked into the top 100 on the Jiao Tong rankings last year at 97) "is a remarkable tribute to the quality of the commitment of my colleagues", he says.

"But the system can only trade on that for a certain amount of time. Australia now faces a decision. Do we actually believe that education is important, and do we want to be an innovation-producing country or an innovation-importing country?"

"Australia would be barking mad not to spend more money on education and higher education than it is doing right, or to fail to take particular advantage of this opportunity [the recession]," says Spence, adding he believes in the sincerity of the Rudd government's commitment to education.

Spence is unsure how student entitlements will play out in his university, saying that the French and Italian systems which guarantee a place for anyone who matriculates have resulted in bottom-heavy first-year courses and painfully high dropout rates.

"We don't want to see that in Australia. We also don't have the infrastructure or available academic staff," he says.

Spence's management style is consultative and inclusive, and he has rearranged the senior management team to include the deans. He forgoes the title of professor, preferring plain old Dr Spence.

For a vice-chancellor of one of the highest profile universities in the country, Spence has been, to date, very low-key. He's quoted as saying he doesn't believe in "star vice-chancellors" and there is little of the superstar VC ego about him. "I would of personal preference much rather see us being in the newspaper because of one of the extraordinary discoveries of our researchers or because of some great teaching program rather than because I am pontificating about this, that or the other.

"I do think vice-chancellors have a duty in the debate about higher education, but I don't think self-promotion is one of my features."