

In the spotlight

He came, he took stock, he consulted. And eventually he instigated a series of subtle changes – a drop of oil here, a replacement part there.

On 11 July, it was exactly a year since Michael Spence became Sydney's 29th vice-chancellor. The Spence era has been one of openness, the Vice-Chancellor records cheery video messages and staff are kept in touch with tricky pay negotiations by email.

It has also been an era of new ideas about management, with the unveiling of the Vice-Chancellor's Workslate, a shake-up of senior executives and the creation of a specialist group of non-academic advisors and strategists.

But how would the Vice-Chancellor himself assess his first year? **Richard North** asked him.

What single moment have you enjoyed most in the past year?

A couple of weeks ago I was explaining to some high school students from Penrith why they should think about coming to university and in particular the University of Sydney. It made me realise how much I had learned in a year about the fabulous work of the University across its 16 faculties, how proud I was of that work and how easily I was able to recommend what we do.

How would you prefer to describe yourself?

As somebody who keeps an eye on the whole landscape but is perfectly willing to zoom in and roll up their sleeves if there's a particular job to be done or attention needs to be paid to a particular issue.

What has surprised you most after coming back to Sydney?

I found a place that in the last decade had grown enormously, but whose administrative structures and decision making processes weren't always able to keep up with that growth. So we have been trying over the past year with a measure of success to create a more coherent



internal decision making process and bring greater coordination to the activities of the University-wide portfolios. I have been encouraged by the great enthusiasm that there is for addressing those problems.

Has the role matched up to your original expectations – has it been more enjoyable, more difficult?

It has been enormously enjoyable to reconnect with my alma mater and to help people think through what we need for the future. There have been difficulties, of course, but people are now talking to one another, and we have a team that is working as a team.

Where do we go from here – what is the next big issue on your agenda?

The next stage is to conduct a University-wide conversation culminating in a Green Paper that will be published in October. This will set major strategic directions for the next period in the University's life. Those strategic directions will be focused on positioning the University as a very high-end internationally competitive research institution which we can only justify if we are also showing that we are making a profound social contribution and are open to young Australians of promise whatever their social or cultural background.

Your leadership group is about to change significantly. How will that affect the university?

Yes, eight out of 16 new deans and a new Provost...I think it's very

exciting because just at the time we are formulating strategies and thinking about new ways forward, there are new people in key roles and that will give the team a tremendous amount of energy. I have also introduced into my own team some critical expertise in areas such as government relations and policy advice.

Are you happy with the progress we have made over the last year?

I think we have made significant progress, but I am engaged in a major process of cultural transition and this place is an ocean liner. Ocean liners don't turn quickly.

Is there anything you would have done differently?

In the best of all possible worlds we would have started the strategic conversation slightly sooner. I think that with a new vice-chancellor there's a sense of expectation, and to have the agenda-setting conversation as soon as possible would have been very desirable.

How would you fill in your own annual appraisal?

I want people to get the sense that I have spent a year thoroughly learning the business of the University, establishing the fora for the conversations we need to have, and building a team at the centre so we can have this big strategic conversation. I have some pretty clear ideas about where the University should be going and I think I have been making them clear in various ways over the last six months.

I am genuinely interested in hearing what the University community has to say about the key challenges facing us. On the administrative side I think the University has excessive layers of bureaucracy because of our multicentricity, and we need to do something about streamlining and simplifying.

The University is academically and financially strong. The question is how we more firmly occupy the high-end position that we need to occupy. **SAM**

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