Developing the IT Workforce at the University of South Australia

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EDUCAUSE is a nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology.

The mission of the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research is to foster better decision making by conducting and disseminating research and analysis about the role and implications of information technology in higher education. ECAR will systematically address many of the challenges brought more sharply into focus by information technologies.

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Preface

The EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) produces research to promote effective decisions regarding the selection, operation, management, socialization, and use of information technologies in higher education. ECAR research includes:

- research bulletins—timely and topical analyses of key information technology (IT) issues;
- research studies—in-depth research on complex and consequential topics, technologies, and practices, generally relying on quantitative analysis of survey data and on interviews with key practitioners;
- roadmaps—summary reports designed to provide executive readers with easy-to-read but analytically rich guidance on essential areas of IT investment;
- case studies—designed to describe effective IT management and institutional management practices and to draw lessons that are transportable across higher education environments; and
- occasional papers—studies on specialized topics or topics of emerging interest.

ECAR Internationalization Effort

In July 2007, ECAR initiated a major effort to extend its research and understanding of IT practices outside North America. Among ECAR’s subscribers are more than 60 institutions that operate outside the United States. ECAR leadership concluded that (1) efforts of substantial importance are under way in universities and colleges in the developed and emerging world economies, and (2) the opportunity exists to expand both the international relevance of ECAR work and potentially its readership and market. These conclusions led to the creation of a plan of work that included:

- a major survey research initiative designed to gain a deep understanding of IT security, identity management, and research cyberinfrastructure (e-research) practices outside North America;
- a series of planned meetings with university IT leaders in Australia, China, England, France, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, and the Netherlands to develop a deeper understanding of the issues and priorities facing institutions in these countries; and
- a series of case studies highlighting the Bologna process that is shaping European higher education, and effective practices at Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology (Australia), the University of Porto (Portugal), and the University of South Australia.
Acknowledgments at the University of South Australia

The authors of this case study interviewed a cross section of administrative and academic staff at two metropolitan campuses of the University of South Australia (UniSA): City West and Mawson Lakes, both in Adelaide, South Australia. During our two-day visit in March 2008 to the two sites, we had the opportunity to conduct in-depth discussions with the executive sponsors from the university.

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Australia

Australia is the world’s sixth largest nation in land area, with a population of just over 21 million people. It is known as the earth’s largest island, the driest inhabited continent, and the smallest, flattest continent. About 2.4% of the Australian population consists of indigenous people, descendants of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. Australia’s colonial history began with the arrival of the First Fleet of 11 ships carrying approximately 1,500 British subjects. Half of these first settlers were convicts, and their arrival on January 26, 1788, is celebrated annually as Australia Day. The Commonwealth of Australia was established as a sovereign nation on January 1, 1901, from a federation of colonies of Great Britain.

Australia is governed through power shared by a bicameral parliament, an executive branch headed by the prime minister, and a judiciary branch. Modern Australia has been shaped in the crucible of critical events of the 20th century, by the tensions and interplay of both indigenous and colonial roots, by the increasing diversification of the Australian population as a result of shifts in global patterns of migration, and most recently by the emergence of China as a major trading partner. Australians have served in the armed forces along with citizens of the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries in virtually every conflict since World War I.

Recent federal elections replaced the long-standing Liberal government of John Howard with the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. On February 13, 2008, Rudd issued a formal and official apology to the Aboriginal people in particular for the policy—in force until 1970—of forced removal...
of indigenous children from their families as part of a process of assimilation. This apology is heralded as the starting point in plans for ambitious improvements in Aboriginal life, health, education, and prosperity.

**Higher Education in Australia**

The higher education sector in Australia comprises various providers recognized and approved by the Australian government. A higher education provider can be a university (which is self-accrediting), another self-accrediting provider, or a non-self-accrediting (private) provider. In 2007, the Australian higher education system comprised 39 universities, including 2 private institutions. There were 5 self-accrediting institutions and more than 150 non-self-accrediting providers that form a diverse group of specialized and mainly private institutions, including theological colleges and those that offer courses in business, IT, natural therapies, hospitality, health, law, and accounting.

The total operating revenue for the nation’s universities in 2006 was AU$5.9 billion, including government grants and student fees. Those funds contributed to support for a total enrollment of 984,000 students (692,000 full-time equivalents) in 2006.

University education in Australia enjoys a high international reputation. Australian universities are part of a clearly recognized international community of scholarship, with academic staff recruited internationally and students also increasingly coming from overseas as well as from across Australia. The Australian higher education sector is now Australia’s fourth largest export industry.

Except for the Australian National University, which is constituted under federal law, all of Australia’s universities are established or recognized under state or territorial law. The federal government has principal responsibility for public funding of the 37 public universities, although universities are increasingly seeking funds from the wider community, in part as a result of the government’s stated intention to diversify the public–private funding mix for universities. The formal governing body of each Australian university is a council, senate, or board of governors, presided over by a chancellor elected by the members of the governing body. Governing body members are drawn from government, industry, the community, academic staff, graduates, and students.

The chief executive authority for each Australian university rests with the vice chancellor (often also called the president), who is accountable to the council, senate, or board of governors and is responsible for the academic and administrative operation of the institution.

The government of Prime Minister John Howard ushered in a number of important reforms to Australian higher education. The Howard government’s research and innovation programs—Backing Australia’s Ability I (2001–2005) and Backing Australia’s Ability II (2005–2011)—provide approximately $8 billion in federal government funding over 10 years toward the promotion of science and innovation, the commercialization of research, and the advancement of Australia as a knowledge economy. These initiatives have encouraged the establishment of world-class research centers in areas of national economic significance; identified and allocated funding toward national research priorities; enhanced linkages among universities, business, and industry; and led to additional competitive research funding through the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council. In 2003, the Australian government launched Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future, the Howard government’s blueprint for major higher education reform. This blueprint encompassed teaching and learning, workplace relations, governance, student financing, research, cross-sectoral collaboration, and quality matters. The Backing Australia’s Future
program provided an additional government investment of approximately $1.5 billion over four years, beginning in 2004.

The Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) provides to each university a fixed amount per academic discipline toward the cost of an agreed-on number of Commonwealth-supported student places each year. Funding under the CGS is contingent on a university’s adherence to the National Higher Education Governance Protocols and compliance with the Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements. The Australian government funds additional places for students in priority areas such as nursing, education, and medicine as well as new places to keep pace with anticipated population growth. Although the government and student contributions may differ for different academic disciplines among universities, the cost of university attendance by Australian citizens is low. In addition, graduate study is supported by additional merit-based scholarships, and special government funding is available to support Australia’s equity objectives for indigenous people, students with special needs, students living in remote and isolated areas, and others.

National government research grants are paid through the Research Infrastructure Block Grants (RIBGs) and the Institutional Grants Scheme (IGS). RIBGs provide research funding on a calendar-year basis to enhance the development and maintenance of research infrastructure. RIBG funds are allocated to eligible higher education providers on the basis of their relative share of Australian competitive grant income. In 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available, $183 million was allocated to eligible higher education providers from this source. The IGS allocation mechanism reflects providers’ relative success in a performance index comprising research income (60%), Commonwealth-funded research student load (30%), and research publications (10%). In 2005, $291 million was allocated to eligible higher education providers from this source of funds.

The Research Training Scheme (RTS) provides block funding, on a calendar-year basis, to eligible higher education providers to support research training for students undertaking doctorate and master’s degrees by research. In 2005, $552 million was allocated to eligible higher education providers from the RTS.

Grants to support the development of systemic infrastructure used by higher education providers are paid through the Systemic Infrastructure Initiative (SII), with funds directed to key areas including the provision of high-speed communications links and facilitating discovery, access, and dissemination of scholarly and scientific information. SII funds are allocated on the advice of the Australian Research and Education Network Advisory Committee (ARENAC) and the Australian Research Information Infrastructure Committee (ARIIC). Through the SII, the government has provided more than $84 million for high-speed communications links, plus more than $52 million for 22 projects to improve the research information infrastructure and a further $29 million to the Australian Partnership for Advanced Computing (APAC) for 2004–2006 to strengthen the national advanced computing capabilities and to develop the national advanced computing and grid infrastructure.

In its first 100 days, the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative that will assess research quality and help universities develop centers of excellence in specified fields. The ERA initiative announced on February 26, 2008, will call
upon the Australian Research Council and the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research to facilitate a review by committees comprising experienced, internationally recognized experts.

**The University of South Australia**

The University of South Australia, or UniSA, is a public university in the Australian state of South Australia. It was formed in 1991 with the merger of the South Australian Institute of Technology and Colleges of Advanced Education. Notwithstanding this apparent youth, one of UniSA’s antecedent institutions, the South Australian School of Arts, dates back to 1856, making it one of the oldest art schools in Australia. The University of South Australia, with 36,000 students, is the largest university in South Australia.

UniSA is a leading expert in technical education and applied research and is a founding member of the Australian Technology Network (ATN). The ATN is a partnership that includes the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), UniSA, Curtin University, Queensland University of Technology, and the University of Technology, Sydney.

UniSA has four metropolitan campuses in Adelaide and two regional campuses, in Whyalla and Mount Gambier. The metropolitan campuses have specific academic focuses: City West focuses on business, law, art, and architecture; Magill focuses on teaching, humanities, and social sciences; City East specializes in health, biomedical, pharmaceutical, and nursing programs; and Mawson Lakes teaches engineering, technical, and scientific disciplines. The regional campuses have a more generalist focus.

Despite its relatively recent origins and the teaching focus of its predecessor institutions, UniSA has emerged as a research-intensive institution. The university ranks 13th among Australian universities in the dollars awarded for sponsored research undertaken. UniSA investments and efforts are guided by five interrelated priorities. These priorities include:

**Educating Professionals**

Many UniSA programs have been designed in consultation with industry and the professions. Often these programs include fieldwork, industry-guided simulations, and industry projects. UniSA educators believe that real-world experience undertaken during university study equips UniSA graduates with the qualities employers are seeking.

**Creating and Applying Knowledge**

UniSA is committed to creating and applying knowledge. The university’s research profile is based on bringing together multidisciplinary teams from industry, business, and the professions to work on projects that are both relevant and beneficial to the community. The university’s research priorities during the last decade have focused on sustainability, healthy lifestyle, and modeling and managing complex systems.

**Engaging the Community**

The driving force behind both the UniSA professional education programs and the institution’s applied research focus is meeting the present and future needs of society. Engaging the community is a defining characteristic of the way the university undertakes its core business, and the university is enriched through its interaction with different communities.

**Diversity**

Intellectual, cultural, social, and racial diversity is woven into the fabric of the University of South Australia. Diversity in this context includes a major commitment to fostering an international student body. UniSA has grown rapidly to become a major provider of Australian higher education offshore.
and has the largest number of international students in Adelaide. Thirty percent of UniSA’s students are international students, compared with the Australian average of 21%. UniSA is also committed to supporting the access of indigenous people to higher education. It has committed itself to reconciliation between indigenous and nonindigenous people and has in place a range of programs to support the education of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, as well as their employment as staff members.

Equitable Access

UniSA works actively to increase educational opportunity for Australians. Equitable access programs include special-entry programs for people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, programs for people who have experienced educational or social disadvantage, extensive credit transfer arrangements with the vocational education and training sector, and high-quality teaching and extensive student services support for students who enter using alternative pathways. UniSA also actively encourages the participation of women in nontraditional areas of study and employment.

Vision, Strategy, and Leadership

Having established a strong track record of success and achievement in its first 17 years as a university, UniSA continues to look to the future. The institution recently renewed its vision statement, which now reads, “It is our vision that UniSA will be a leading contributor to Australia having the best higher education system in the world, supporting the world’s best educated and most innovative, cohesive and sustainable society.”

Executing the vision of many colleges and universities often depends on recruiting and retaining the best people. Not all institutions are successful in these pursuits. The successful ones are those that not only motivate and inspire their constituents, but those that also instantiate their vision through strategic planning and by investment in creating and fostering an energetic, diverse, vibrant, and productive workforce. The UniSA case describes both the commitment of one university to its workforce and the IT organization’s formal and successful effort to support the institution’s vision through programs to create and foster a high-performing IT team.

Under the leadership of former Vice Chancellor Denise Bradley, UniSA developed an early pragmatic focus on its workforce both as a matter of institutional salvation and to help it create its own future. Bradley served as vice chancellor for 10 years, from 1997 to 2007. Since its formation in 1991, UniSA had encountered stiff challenges in transforming itself from its roots—as the product of a merger of a technical institute and a college of advanced education—into a comprehensive research-oriented university. As with many mergers and consolidations, the new institution’s evolution from technical institute to university brought with it workforce misalignments and the need for adjustments. In some cases, employees of UniSA’s antecedent institutions had been hired for an entirely different kind of organization. Some members of both the merging academic and professional staff had neither the training nor the appropriate qualifications and experience to make a successful university career or to make a university successful. Some of the academic staff found themselves facing an entirely new set of expectations. At the time of UniSA’s creation, fewer than 10% of the academic staff had doctoral degrees. By contrast, the long-standing, or “sandstone,” institutions in Australia have on average 85% PhD-educated instructors.

Looking back, former Vice Chancellor Bradley is widely credited with dramatically improving the university’s financial position and with focusing considerable attention on people. Under her leadership, UniSA’s propor-
tion of PhD instructors grew an average of 3–4% annually and now represents 55% of academic staff. This has been accomplished both by giving existing staff the opportunity to upgrade their skills and qualifications and by recruiting aggressively. Bradley is also credited with a sustained emphasis on equity for both students and employees. She built a high-performing executive team, and she set high expectations for the collegiality and individual behaviors that would enable UniSA to build the strong academic reputation and brand that it increasingly enjoys today.

**Policies for People**

UniSA has a long-standing and explicit commitment to equity. This commitment began with its concern for disadvantaged students, and the university’s equity policies help attract regional students who come from nontraditional cohorts. Many of the university’s practices have demonstrated positive effects and predate the current efforts by the Australian national and state governments to close the gaps in education between the nation’s indigenous population and the majority of its citizens.

The university’s concern for equity extends to the academic and professional staff ranks as well. The university has an enviable track record in gender equity, with women occupying 4 of the 10 positions on the senior executive team. The institution has formalized its commitment to the employment of indigenous staff in its collective agreements and in other internal labor policies. It has put in place and worked hard to develop a growing series of family-friendly polices that range from equal opportunity (with relevant clauses in areas of family responsibility, age, and marital status) to flexible work options that are built directly into the Academic and Professional Staff Collective Agreement. This comprehensive approach to equity mirrors the overall holistic strategy that is taken to workforce management.

This is a challenging time for the university’s recruiting efforts. There is a scarcity of skills in the area’s employment market, and the shortage is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. As in many regions, the population of South Australia is aging: Fewer people are entering the workforce than are planning to leave it during the next decade or more. Competition for qualified people, students as well as staff, is especially strong as a result of Australia’s booming mining sector, which even in today’s turbulent financial environment continues to thrive and grow, fueled by a seemingly insatiable demand from China and elsewhere for natural resources. As with most universities, UniSA’s compensation packages do not compare favorably with those of many private-sector employers, particularly in burgeoning industries like mining. Consequently, the institution’s reputation for being a family-friendly employer, committed to the well-being of its academic and professional staff, serves as a competitive differentiator in this highly competitive labor market.

**The Executive Team**

The UniSA executive team manifests and models the institution’s focus on people as the priority. Effective behavioral norms, governance, structures, and programs that were established under Bradley continue to this day. First, there is an expectation of “cabinet solidarity,” meaning that although disagreement and debate are encouraged around the cabinet table, once debate is closed, individuals are expected to demonstrate their commitment to the decision. Second, to ensure that the strong and sustained emphasis on people, collegiality, and productivity would be built deeply into the institution’s culture, in 2003 UniSA created the position of Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice President, Organizational Strategy and Change. The role encompasses human resources, IT, and planning and assurance services (which includes
internal auditing). At the time this position was created, it was the first of its kind at an Australian university. Today there are a dozen or more positions with this portfolio across the sector. Hilary Winchester was recruited from Flinders University into the newly created position and remains in the role today. Third, among other things, the executive team develops ad hoc and standing structures to facilitate communication, support, and collaborative problem-solving across all of the institution’s academic divisions and administrative units.

When new challenges arise or, as Winchester puts it, “When we just need to get something done,” the university often looks to its network of interdepartmental leadership groups. These groups provide an important structure and support for a process of planning, problem solving, and cross-cutting communication. Two prominent examples are the group of 16 administrative directors, including IT, and the heads of UniSA’s 21 schools. Each of these groups meets regularly, with intergroup meetings two or three times per year. There is an annual retreat where each group spends a day with its own agenda; a second day is set aside for a full intergroup meeting. The cross section of roles within the directors group ensures that strategic institutional priorities benefit from a well-rounded set of perspectives.

The members of these groups act collaboratively to sort things out in preference to escalating problems to the executive team. The executive team is supportive of this behavioral norm, and voluntary compliance seems to be working effectively. The peer groups have worked together to provide consolidated advice on various issues. For instance, they have developed a document describing their perspectives on desired elements in collective bargaining discussions. Recently, the topic of improving the protocol for provisioning new staff was on the agenda of a brainstorming session of the administrative directors. As a result, the group was able to address a wide range of needs for any newly hired employee, from building access to technology to scheduling orientation programs. There is even a steering committee for these peer groups that plans an annual agenda and reviews year-end accomplishments. As with so many aspects of workforce management that we observed during this study, the trademark UniSA holistic approach has been applied to these peer groups, ensuring their effectiveness through simple structures, clear mandates, and candid relationships.

Finally, in addition to these internal governance, cultural, and behavioral approaches and expectations, the entire executive team is directly involved in UniSA’s “corporate induction” events, which occur four times each year. This is a formal part of the workforce management strategy, and the events are very well received by new staff. The induction program provides in-depth information on a wide range of campus resources, from the governance and management of the institution, to employee responsibilities, to tailored sessions for new international staff.

In effect, UniSA’s leaders “walk the talk.” The university maintains a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) that it uses to track its workforce performance and to hold itself accountable for success in this important dimension of performance. Overall, UniSA’s workforce-related KPIs are trending in the right direction. The university is seeing people who in the past might not have considered coming to UniSA now viewing the university as an employer of choice. The list of recruits increasingly includes academic staff with successful research careers—just the sort of recruits the university is looking for. Winchester summed it up: “A few key people have been instrumental in our progress, particularly our former vice chancellor. We have a lot of things on the books that help us recruit and retain great staff.”
A New Vice Chancellor Builds on Existing Excellence

“We are a proud institution with a remarkable level of achievement but with aspirations that require improvements in everything we do.” So begins UniSA’s vision-driven roadmap entitled “New Horizons: Our Aspirations, People, and Performance.” In word and spirit, “New Horizons” echoes the energy, enthusiasm, and drive for peak performance embodied in Vice Chancellor Peter Høj, who began his role at the university in June 2007. Building on the strength of the executive team created by his predecessor, Høj sees his job as taking UniSA to the next level of reputational, academic, and research excellence. He is direct, candid, energetic, and enthusiastic and a strong proponent of data-driven decision making. He is also competitive and determined to help place UniSA among the first rank of Australian universities.

Born, raised, and educated in Denmark, Høj came to Australia for love: He married an Australian woman who managed to convince him that the climate of South Australia was an improvement over that of his homeland. Once in Australia, the young academic wasted no time getting onto the fast track. Following a brief appointment in a junior faculty position at La Trobe University in Melbourne, he shifted his academic focus away from traditional biochemistry and in 1995 became the first full professor of viticulture in Australia. After three years in that role, he decided to leave academia and became managing director of the Australian Wine Institute. This small industry research group relies dominantly on private funding, requiring an entrepreneurial approach to management and funding that suffuses Høj’s leadership style. During this period he became a private member of the Prime Minister’s Science Council, where he served for six years. Høj was then asked to run the Australian Research Council, the Australian equivalent of the National Science Foundation (NSF). He did that for almost three years. His long-standing career goal, however, was to work at a modern institution that had scope for improvement. The University of South Australia was made to order.

Under Høj’s leadership, the university has developed some key indicators of future success when

- members of the UniSA community think “one UniSA” and work together to take the university into a sustainable, prosperous, and prominent future;
- UniSA can be proud of every single one of its employees and all employees can say they are happy to be with UniSA;
- UniSA graduates say, “I went to UniSA with a dream and left not only with the tools to be able to fulfill that dream but also with the belief that I can”;
- UniSA students look back on the achievements of their lives and consider their UniSA experiences to have played a vital role in their personal and professional success; and
- UniSA is among the most research-intensive universities in Australia and recognized as such both in Australia and abroad.

A tall order!

The vice chancellor and senior leadership of UniSA identified people as the key to UniSA’s future and have defined, developed, and nurtured an ambitious program of people-related policies, programs, and interventions to instantiate this belief. On his arrival in June 2007, Høj identified what he felt was a major weakness: a lack of broad external benchmarking. What benchmarking existed, within the academic ranks, was often internal, with one school within UniSA comparing itself against another. In Høj’s view, this set inappropriate performance expectations and isolated the university’s performance measures from those of its peers and competitors.

Early benchmarking revealed to Høj a number of things. First, the data confirmed
the fundamental wisdom of his predecessor and the basic strengths of the UniSA executive team. Second, it reinforced Høj's instincts to press simultaneously for excellence in research and a commitment to educational quality and equity. As Høj puts it, “The values and capabilities implicit in research excellence and in educational excellence and equity are mutually reinforcing.” The vice chancellor clearly understands the push and pull of UniSA’s unique history: “We need to celebrate,” he told us. “The tension,” he adds, “is between simultaneously celebrating and impelling us to do more.” And Høj understands too that a new leader must both consult extensively with his new constituents and move fast. “We must all learn to sleep fast,” he notes with just a little irony.

People are at the heart of Høj’s agenda for UniSA. The university’s strategy under his leadership emphasizes

- a much stronger focus on UniSA’s students, as well as academic and general staff;
- a shared culture defined by a passion to teach, research, support, and serve;
- enhanced performance, guided by national and international benchmarks;
- meaningful planning that builds workforce capacity, capabilities, and infrastructure; and
- institutional profitability that ensures the institution’s ability to invest in areas of strategic need and impact.

Under Høj’s leadership, UniSA is engaged in a wide-ranging process of discussion and review of its statement of strategic intent. UniSA’s Corporate Plan 2008–2010 emphasizes learning and teaching, research, and the development of a high-achiever student body. The plan specifically identifies an evidence-based approach, experiential learning, and the celebration of outcomes to enhance learning and teaching. It goes on to identify the intention to build research capacity, income, co-investment, and the number of “globally connected PhD graduates of outstanding quality,” and to increase the number and quality of research publications. The high-achiever strategy focuses attention on recruiting, developing, engaging, and retaining high-performing students and encouraging high performers to progress to higher degrees.

Also central to UniSA’s strategy is the creation of a unique “employee value proposition.” Høj and his executive team aim to build on UniSA’s reputation as a national employer of choice. Under Høj’s leadership, UniSA plans to “look more closely at the alignment of our management, rewards, awards, and promotions systems to ensure they are driving and sustaining the performance outcomes we need.”

Talent, Scarcity, and Excellence

Vice Chancellor Høj’s focus on people is not runaway altruism. Behind his vision and strategy for UniSA is his drive to attract, develop, and nurture an academic and professional staff capable of delivering world-class education and research. William Somerset Maugham once said that “genius is talent provided with ideals.” That said, universities—in their finest realization—are organizations designed to attract and retain people of talent, to reinforce their sense of purpose, and of course to invest in them the resources they will need to realize their genius. Høj indicated that he is building on the foundation laid by former Vice Chancellor Bradley by pursuing a “high-performance culture driven by pride and passion.” As Høj puts it: “We want not only to find them [high achievers], but to develop them.”

Høj’s clear accent on developing a high-performance institution is music to Paul Sherlock’s ears and to Hilary Winchester. These leaders, however, are mindful of the inherent challenges of a strategy that depends on attracting, retaining, and developing
talent. The 21st century is witness to a likely unprecedented reshaping of the workforce in much of the developed world. In Australia, the United States, Japan, and much of Europe, a large and growing segment of the workforce is made up of baby boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964. The oldest members of this age cohort are now 62, and significant numbers of so-called boomers have begun to leave the workforce. Thirteen percent of the Australian population is currently 65 or older. Australia boasts 4 million baby boomers (out of a 20.4-million total population), compared with 8 million in Canada (33.4 million) and 76 million in the United States (301.1 million). Economically, Australia’s baby boomers are relatively well off. The typical Australian baby boomer earns more than the average adult, lives in a two-income household, and is better educated than Australians overall. Baby boomers are now in their peak earning time and are inheriting the wealth accumulated by their dying parents.4

These demographics are well understood in Australia and are a matter of ongoing public policy concern. Indeed, the age structure of the developed world; the rapid growth in the demand for skilled labor in China, Southeast Asia, and India; the increasingly international nature of higher education; and other factors are conspiring to form the conditions for what many are describing as a looming talent war. For example, 27% of all academics appointed at U.K. universities during 2005–2006 were non-U.K. nationals.5

The growing competition for talent stands squarely in the path of Vice Chancellor Høj’s vision of building on the talent of the UniSA academic staff, though the tasks and tools of globally ranked universities have always included the global identification of and acquisition of academic talent. In the years ahead, this will become harder. It is clear that, as one report notes, “The international dimensions of academic staffing need to be clearly understood by institutions and national organizations.”6

Administrative excellence in universities, too, depends on developing a talented and passionate workforce, as Høj understands. In general, however, university administrative organizations do not have deep international dimensions and therefore are more heavily influenced by the structure, composition, and dynamics of the national, regional, state, and local labor markets. According to Philip Tusing, author of the “Greythorn Recruiting Index,” Australia’s strong economy and low unemployment rate, combined with the global competition for talent and the world’s increasing need for technology to run business, are conspiring to create an especially tight market for IT skills. In addition, “The image of the IT profession as a career choice and an aging population will also further contribute to the skills shortage. It will get worse if major steps are not taken.”7 Even worse, worldwide enrollments in computer science have been declining for years. In Australia’s universities and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, these enrollments are down 30% since the beginning of the decade.

Building a High-Performance Culture

As may already have become apparent, UniSA is a dynamic and motivated institution. It seeks to be among the best universities. Under Peter Høj, the vice chancellor’s office continues to provide leadership in attracting, recruiting, developing, and maintaining the best academic and professional staff. The goal is to develop a culture that values high performance in all facets of the institution’s operations. It involves developing the talent of the current workforce as well as recruiting new people and new skills, driven by what Høj calls “inspirational workforce leadership” and performance management. Somewhat more tactically, UniSA has launched initiatives to improve succession planning, apply appropriate incentives and rewards for good
performance, and develop a more concerted approach to managing underperformance. To ensure that progress stays on track, the institution is guided by relevant external benchmarking for high achievement.

To attract the best new talent, UniSA is positioning itself as a place that offers strong career advancement opportunities as part of the process of institution building. UniSA is developing tailored contracts and a clear “employee value proposition” to highlight the distinctive elements of the culture. Initiatives are under way to further improve the process of settling in and acclimatizing new staff to the university—in short, to position UniSA as a great place to work. There are clear signs of success in this area, including the national award for Public Employer of the Year (2005) and the diversity@work Employment and Inclusion Award for Work/Life Balance in 2006, among several other signs of external recognition.

To build and sustain a high-performance culture, UniSA is again turning to national and international benchmark data to create internal definitions for high performance within academic disciplines, research areas, and administrative functions. There is continual emphasis on the notion that the institution’s leadership values will reward high performance. This is an important part of the process and one where the vice chancellor and his team are leading by example. The university has developed a suite of both financial and nonfinancial rewards, including allowances and bonuses. It actively creates opportunities for staff to assume higher duties and secondments based on performance. As we shall see, secondment plays a key role in the successful workforce programs within UniSA’s IT unit.

UniSA uses a variety of means to build and strengthen its existing talent. Again starting with valid external benchmarks, the university has developed programs for performance management and peer review, coaching and career development, and appropriate professional development opportunities. A host of internal development programs are available for those seeking to improve their pedagogical skills, for early career researchers, and for individuals or teams applying for major research grants for the first time. UniSA is investing in the development and performance of frontline management and leaders, in recognition of the essential role they play in retaining, motivating, and engaging staff across campus. And to look at one of the most difficult areas of workforce management, the university has recognized the importance of managing underperformance as a vital factor in developing a high-performance culture. The institution has increased its efforts to develop and follow clear and simple processes for managing underperformance and is holding managers in all facets of the institution accountable for performance management.

Høj summarized UniSA’s approach eloquently. “The key,” he states, “is to celebrate past success and to recognize that we have things to be proud of without becoming satisfied. Our challenge is to get people looking outside [for comparisons] and to set the stretch goals that will determine how far we go.”

And what about the equity dimension? UniSA’s previous vice chancellor, Denise Bradley, was (and remains) someone with a strong national profile for equitable access. Similarly, Winchester was instrumental in setting gender equity targets and a national gender equity plan for the sector in 2006. In contrast, Høj came in from what some may have seen as an elite environment. People feared that the equity focus might be diminished, so Høj has set out to convince them that it will not. He advises skeptics to watch the KPI for equitable access. If this indicator is not going down, then equity is not going away; if the indicator is rising, it demonstrates the strength of UniSA’s executive team’s commitment to equity and the effectiveness
of equity-related programs and investments. Recently, during the lead-up to last year’s federal election, Høj and a senior colleague at UniSA coauthored an unsolicited grant proposal to fund Australia’s first National Centre for Equity Research. The proposal was a success, and they are now hiring people into the Centre. Høj continuously asserts that equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive. He believes that when a student from a disadvantaged background graduates from UniSA and later applies for a job, the UniSA degree must be seen as an indicator of excellence that accelerates the student’s success. This language is slowly taking hold with people. “If we don’t try to become more and more excellent, we are not turbocharging our equity mission. That’s what it’s about.”

The UniSA executive team is putting in place a high-achiever strategy for students as well. It will not only seek to attract high achievers but also to develop them during their studies. Consistent with his emphasis on data-driven decisions, Høj gathered data that compared the academic performance of students from more affluent families with that of students from disadvantaged homes. Perhaps not surprisingly, he found that affluence was a good indicator of early success—in the first year of studies. However, the effect of an affluent background diminished over time and was not evident by the students’ fourth year. Høj asserts that this is a strong indicator that the added value of academic excellence works with and augments the benefits of equitable access. Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds who come to UniSA can graduate knowing that they have received a high-quality education. Potential employers can know the same thing. His passionate argument is compelling. “How could you live with yourself,” he asks, “if you knew that a young person who could have gone to other universities chose to spend four of their prime years with us, worked up a debt they had to pay off, and we didn’t provide them with the best possible toolset to realize their dreams? That’s why we have to perform better. And that fits into the equity mission.”

**IT at the University of South Australia**

Conditions of declining computer science enrollments, an aging workforce, rising demand for IT skills, and global mobility of labor and work are facing nearly all sectors in the developed world. Institutions of higher learning are uniquely disadvantaged in these climates of labor scarcity and heightened competition for several reasons:

- they often operate legacy technology environments that are not attractive to young up-and-coming technologists,
- compensation in higher education often lags that in other industries, and
- the higher education tradition of shared governance and consultative decision making is not for everyone.

“I like a challenge,” says ISTS Director Paul Sherlock. It was a challenge he got. When Sherlock came to UniSA in 2001, the IT department was at a crossroads. The university’s IT had been massively devolved in 1997 and was struggling to determine its service model. “The IT organization also faced a perception that it did not have the vision and long-term plans in place to deliver on what the senior management team was looking for,” Sherlock said.

Against this backdrop, the university’s leaders wanted IT better managed at all levels and the IT organization working more collaboratively with other key areas of the university. This was an exceptionally tall order. When Sherlock first arrived, he spent a few months “kicking the tires.” What he discovered was that there were too many small teams and too much of the work was taking place in “silos.” The needs of the customer were not always at the forefront, and perhaps not surprisingly the skills and capability mix was just not right for a modern IT department.
A difficult time lay ahead. Sherlock initiated a restructuring that resulted in about 30% of the unit’s staff leaving the university over an 18-month period. This large restructuring was followed by several smaller restructurings that have fine-tuned the IT organization into what it is today.

“This was a pretty difficult thing to do,” says Sherlock. “Because of the lack of performance management in place in the organization, many staff were unprepared for the changes that had to be made. Without the enormous support from the vice chancellor and from Winchester, changes of this magnitude would not have been possible.” And, of course, Sherlock depended on those in the IT organization who rallied around the change and recognized in it the hope of better esteem and a better working environment.

According to Sherlock (and confirmed by others), “The whole thing started to turn around.” The management, age, and skill profiles of the organization changed dramatically. Once change gets up and moving, Sherlock observes, “it’s hard to stop.” And, of course, Høj’s vision of a high-performance culture dovetails nicely with Sherlock’s vision and goal for his unit.

UniSA’s IT department has really moved up in that regard. The renamed Information Strategy and Technology Services organization renewed its workforce, devised new university-wide IT governance and funding processes, implemented service delivery models and practices based on the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) methodology, initiated a project portfolio management office, and implemented a wide range of infrastructure and application innovations. The organization has assumed increasing responsibility for computing and communications at all levels of the institution—a move that would not be possible without a reputation for competence and integrity. ISTS has even been asked by sister organizations like the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) to advise on system implementations.

As of our visit to UniSA in March 2008, ISTS was organized with Paul Sherlock as its director. Information Strategy, which includes Corporate Information Systems, Information Architecture and Management, and E-Business Solutions, is headed by Acting Deputy Director Tony Dalwood. Technology Services, which includes Systems Infrastructure (including IT security and identity), Network Services, and Customer Services, is headed by Deputy Director Stephen Stone. The ISTS management team is rounded out by Lohlan Lee, who is directing the organization’s upgrade of its student information system; Lindsey Abadia, who manages IT project services; and Susan Loveday, who manages business services, including human resources (HR) and finance. In all, there are nearly 100 employees in the unit.

**Building a High-Performance Culture in ISTS**

As early as 2003, the ISTS management team understood that developing a high-performance culture would not be easy. The group had weathered 18 months of wrenching turnaround management and now needed to turn its attention to rebuilding an organization so that it could be seen as indispensable to the rest of the institution. They concluded that the culture they sought would need to feature holistic and simultaneous effort on a number of fronts:

- improving recruitment practices to attract people to ISTS despite the competitive labor market;
- recognizing and rewarding high performance in the face of a university compensation system that features no merit pay and is limited in options to recognize unusually strong performance;
- improving performance management and performance improvement prac-
External Recruitment

Universities are often notoriously careful recruiters, where careful can be read to mean “slow.” Higher education’s propensity toward carefulness is understandable. Our organizations are dispersed, and our hiring authorities are often poorly trained in marketing, interviewing, and evaluating candidates because recruitments occur infrequently for most. We frequently search through committee processes among the professional staff, replicating behaviors used in academic staff recruitments. Also, job recruitments in publicly funded institutions must meet extraordinarily high standards of accountability and transparency vis-à-vis equity and freedom from bias, among other things. Finally, higher education operates in the hope and belief that new hires will remain at the institution that hired them for many years. Notwithstanding all of these real and understandable pressures, the dynamics of the IT job market demand nimbleness. “Yes,” said Andy Koronios, head of the School of Computer and Information Science at UniSA. “Enrollments in computer science are down while demand for people with these skills is rising. Our best undergraduates are completing their studies with two or more job offers before they graduate. What’s more, demand for skilled workers is higher than supply in almost every area. This fact may be reducing the economic allure of computer science and related fields.”

Recognizing that lengthy recruitments can lose the best candidates in tight job markets, the ISTS unit has instituted a series of initiatives and approaches that are designed to work quickly in a competitive market. To maximize the size of candidate pools, members of Loveday’s team help ISTS managers write and place job advertisements in an interesting and attractive style. And ISTS advertisements reinforce the broader university messages by extolling the workforce-centric vision articulated by Høj. In addition, ISTS now closes job recruitments...
on Monday mornings rather than Friday afternoons. ISTS also has a staff referral program, and employees who refer a candidate who is ultimately hired can receive AU$2,000. And like all universities that operate in tight labor markets, ISTS managers accent the university’s very generous battery of family-friendly benefits in advertisements and in downstream discussions with job finalists.

To streamline the recruitment process, they have simplified the requirements for addressing the selection criteria and provide what they call an “all hands on deck” approach to printing, collating, and issuing applications to members of the interview panels. These interventions and incentives have resulted in shrinking the amount of time needed to create a short list of candidates and in interviews being scheduled within 48 hours of the close of applications.

ISTS staff in Loveday’s HR unit then ensure that reference checking is undertaken immediately once a preferred candidate or set of candidates has been identified.

These interventions and practices have increased candidate pools and reduced significantly the amount of time needed to undertake recruitments in ISTS. ISTS also uses the IT service desk as a “feeder system” in which talented students, regular employees, and others can be tested for their fit with the goals of the high-performance culture and can then be moved around through secondment, lateral moves, and promotions.

Growing Their Own

The ISTS unit has had significant success in “growing its own” talent through an increasingly important partnership with UniSA’s School of Computer and Information Science (CIS). In 2005, following detailed planning between staff in CIS and ISTS, CIS staff “enthusiastically promoted the program to students who completed their studies or were in their final year of study,” said Loveday. In addition to providing written materials describing career opportunities in ISTS, the ISTS staff in 2007 invited CIS students to an ISTS Open Day when managers within the various ISTS units presented overviews of each unit’s work. Since 2005, five UniSA graduates have become members of the ISTS unit. Said Jarrod Martin, one such employee, “I found the advert on the student website, and [it] was one of the more interesting job descriptions I had seen. Salaries were pretty much the same. The amount that I have learned is ridiculous. It is insane.”

The ISTS unit also takes on the potentially onerous paperwork demands of securing employment visas for international students who may become employees. According to ISTS team member Girish Chauhan, “UniSA was one of the few employers who would take me on in terms of the lack of the visa.” Chauhan now works on the upgrade of UniSA’s student information system and like Martin is “pleased with the learning curve [ISTS has offered].” Troy Stearnes, another graduate, sums up his experience this way: “I was very fortunate that this opportunity presented itself with a wage comparable to other graduate roles on offer. The ongoing training and benefits are great, and the friendly people and the environment are part of what keeps me here. Everyone is here to help each other.” Of course, in addition to filling essential positions, ISTS is creating a youthful organization and one that presumably builds on the goodwill developed over the course of a student’s undergraduate experience.

The graduate employment program at ISTS is also helping to overcome the problems associated with recruiting staff to work at the Mawson Lakes campus of UniSA. Mawson Lakes is located 25 minutes from Adelaide’s central business district—a distance that represents a recruitment barrier for some job prospects. CIS is also located in Mawson Lakes, making a shift for successful graduate-employees an easy and likely desirable one. And an unintended but positive
consequence of this program has been a strengthening in the overall relationship between ISTS and CIS.

**Wellness Program**

Playwright Jean Kerr once observed that “the average, healthy, well-adjusted adult gets up at seven-thirty in the morning feeling just plain terrible.” Recognizing that health is not simply the absence of sickness, leaders in the ISTS unit are investing in a variety of programs designed to foster health, safety, and wellness in members of the unit. The practice is not only a heartwarming one—it also fosters loyalty and productivity. “The morale is probably higher here than anywhere else I have worked in a long time,” said Kate Linton, a project officer in Information Strategy. The wellness program includes fortnightly chair massages for interested staff. Says Linton, “I won’t say that it is the highlight of my day, but it is the highlight of my day!” Sherlock smiles as he hears of these effusive reactions. His perspective on health and wellness is both personal and institutional: “Wellness also gets people talking about occupational health and safety, which is a much better angle of approach to the subject than one of regulatory compliance. The wellness program is fundamentally about awareness. We are not trying to tell people how to live their lives, but rather we are giving them information to help them make choices about how they live their lives.”

The wellness program in ISTS has many facets, and the number of program elements is growing. In addition to offering massage, the ISTS unit offers biannual health screens at no cost to participating employees. Health screens measure height, weight, and body fat, as well as cholesterol, blood pressure, and other risk factors for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and other potentially dangerous ailments. Says Sherlock, “I was screened and was surprised to learn that my cholesterol was high. I visited my doctor and we agreed on a program of diet and exercise, and it is now within normal range. Without the health screens, I might never have known I had a problem looming.”

There are many other aspects to the ISTS wellness program.

♦ Getting people moving is one of the major pillars of the ISTS wellness program, because the evidence is clear that a sedentary lifestyle is a risk factor in heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other life-shortening conditions. ISTS provides interested employees with UniSA-branded pedometers and encourages people to register 10,000 steps per day. In addition, ISTS provides interested staff members with release time to participate in the Mawson Lakes Corporate Challenge, in which teams from different corporations in the area compete on walks and runs around Mawson Lakes.

♦ The ISTS management team has an annual team-building day that focuses on wellness.

♦ ISTS has hosted various presentations from chiropractors and physiotherapists. These presentations have become a core part of the program, focusing on issues such as posture, manual handling, and lifting objects. Most of the workshops are arranged over lunch.

♦ Once a week, fresh fruit is provided for each staff member.

♦ The ISTS unit sponsors gym and exercise sessions, tai chi, and karate. ISTS has an arrangement with a local gym for people who want to pursue a fitness program. The fitness center is within easy walking distance of the ISTS offices in Mawson Lakes.

♦ ISTS has put together a library of books on topics ranging from eating well to emotional intelligence; people can borrow them for free. If staff members
make suggestions. Loveday and her team buy new books.
- ISTS supplies “fit balls” and gym sticks, scales to measure weight and body fat, and other easy-to-use and easy-to-access fitness aids.
- ISTS makes flu vaccinations available at no cost to interested staff members. In addition, literature and presentations that emphasize the importance of hydration are made available regularly.

In all, the ISTS wellness program costs the unit about $100 per employee per year. The benefits seem disproportionately high. Linton summed it up: “They’re doing the right thing by me, so I am going to do right by them.” And the ISTS program has been noticed. The UniSA HR department is investigating the feasibility of spreading the ISTS program throughout the university.

**Recognition and Rewards**

In his 1959 seminal book, *The Motivation to Work,*^8^ noted psychologist Frederick Herzberg proposed what is popularly known as the Two Factor Theory related to job satisfaction. Motivating factors give rise to increased job satisfaction, psychological growth, and higher performance in the workplace. Typical motivating factors include achievement, recognition for achievement, growth, advancement, and interesting work. In contrast, “hygiene factors” are needed to prevent dissatisfaction: they do not cause higher levels of motivation, but their absence can lead to dissatisfaction. Interestingly, salary, status, and working conditions are among the most often cited hygiene factors.

There is nothing theoretical about the ISTS program to recognize and reward high performance. The department has developed a wide range of both formal and informal means to motivate and sustain good performers. Their formal processes include financial incentives such as market retention and attraction allowances, performance bonuses, and higher duties allowances.

Secondment opportunities are built into the ISTS culture and are paying big dividends in employee development, experience, communication, and performance. Unlike many college and university environments, in which the only path to experiencing a new set of responsibilities or to effect a change in the workplace environment is to apply for and be awarded a new position, ISTS makes it easy and supports staff who want to test-drive a different role within the department. It’s not just that secondment is not unusual; it is commonplace. As a result, people can move to different parts of the department—and also, but with less frequency, outside the department—within a framework that allows them to take on new responsibilities for a defined period of time. This prevents interested individuals from becoming stereotyped as, say, “the help desk guy.” ISTS staff members on secondment get the same level of regular feedback on their performance in the new role as they would get in their normal job; moreover, they are free to apply for permanent positions in the new area as they come up. Although there is no guarantee of success in obtaining a new permanent position this way—hiring is strictly based on skills and goodness of fit for the role—there is a degree of transparent access to opportunities that is widely appreciated by the department’s staff.

According to acting senior information technologist Tracy Deane, secondment, especially to roles that involve temporary management responsibilities, does wonders to promote communication and understanding at all levels. “It really opens the channels of communication between teams. That is one of the main issues you have in large organizations. People don’t always talk to one another or understand their own and other people’s roles. This way, you go into other teams, you create friendships, you meet people, you understand what they’re going through, and you can be empathetic to their situation.”
ISTS also has a variety of informal ways of recognizing achievement, including a monthly achievement award. Unit managers nominate people, and the winner receives his or her award at a public ceremony during a scheduled morning tea. In presenting these awards, Sherlock makes remarks to not only acknowledge the achievements of the award winner, but also to reinforce the kinds of behaviors that are being rewarded. The awards have credibility and meaning to staff, in part because past recipients have included new hires from the “graduate” program and a long-serving staff member who excelled after moving to a dramatically different role within the unit at a late career stage.

Other informal rewards include movie tickets being offered to staff for a particular task well done—immediately and without fanfare—and team-building days that include fun activities as well as more serious professional development work.

**Developing Skills**

Providing opportunities for existing staff to develop their skills and capabilities is another facet of ISTS’s holistic approach to enabling its workforce. A long-term IT investment plan allows managers to identify and develop the specific skills needed to successfully achieve the goals stated in the plan. Once identified, professional development activities for all staff are reported in a simple spreadsheet that ISTS managers use to track the status of individual employee training plans and to ensure that all of the training opportunities planned for the year are completed in a timely way. A professional development budget equivalent to AU$2,000 per year for each staff member in ISTS ensures resources for training are available when they are needed. Increasingly, it’s the so-called soft skills—as well as the deep technical skills required by a complex university IT environment—that are in high demand. And because ISTS uses the ITIL library of protocols for managing its infrastructure, development, and operations, the department has instituted mandatory ITIL training for all staff.

Professional development goes hand in glove with secondment to add an important dimension to employee mobility and growth. James Kappamankal is currently on secondment from the customer services team, working in software development. He has applied for open positions in his new area but does not yet have quite the skill set required in those roles. So Kappamankal’s manager has worked with him to identify the skills and competencies he will need to improve in order to progress along the career path he plans to pursue. Kappamankal says, “Professional development planning is a collaborative process, where you are encouraged to tell your manager what you want to achieve; it is a dialogue, not something decided by the manager alone.”

Leading by example, Sherlock is a faculty member of the EDUCAUSE Institute in Australia. On average, two staff members from UniSA attend the professional development course run by the institute each year.

**Performance Management and Improvement**

Effective performance management underpins ISTS’s efforts to develop the skills and capabilities of its existing staff. Yet not too many years ago, ISTS lagged behind other departments in implementing the university’s performance management system. That has changed. Today, ISTS is not only fully committed to performance management but has also developed additional mechanisms to make the system even more effective.

Hiring an administrative manager with substantial practical human resource management experience was an important step in developing the processes to help managers address performance management issues. Today, Loveday sees her role less as rule enforcement and more as one of developing a
culture of high performance within ISTS. Says Loveday, “We have a culture where we want to develop our people and we want them to develop into what they want to be and do.” And Loveday helps less experienced managers with this part of their role.

Everyone in ISTS has a performance management plan that is mutually developed with the person's manager. The plans include individual KPIs that are set at the start of the year. Working together, the manager and staff member lay out annual objectives and outcomes. The plan is reviewed jointly two or three times per year to ensure strong ongoing communication about performance. Managers’ progress in maintaining this expected rate of performance dialogue is tracked departmentally, and ISTS managers now simply expect to follow through in this important area. More specifically, the department has developed a performance management register—in the form of a restricted-access SharePoint template. The register contains the status but not the content of performance management plans and reviews for all staff. As Sherlock notes, direct management oversight and a healthy dose of management team peer pressure help keep things on track. “The register is a standing agenda item on the monthly unit management team meeting, and its regular review helps ensure that the responsibilities of each manager with respect to performance management are kept front and center.” The ISTS approach of multiple informal reviews throughout the year is consistent with good practice and ensures a “no surprises” atmosphere around the review meetings.

The department is equally committed to managing and improving poor performance. Even a comprehensive program like the one developed at ISTS, however, cannot alleviate all performance issues. Sometimes the person-to-job fit just isn’t right; and sometimes, well, things just don’t work out. Not surprisingly, Sherlock shows the same direct, unambiguous approach to managing poor performance as we found with all of the ISTS workforce programs. As we have already noted, Sherlock replaced roughly 30% of the ISTS staff within 18 months on the job. Thanks in no small measure to the unit’s constant efforts to develop and sustain a high-performance team over the years, there are very few instances today in which performance improvement is needed. When it is, ISTS does not claim to have any sort of secret formula to make it work effectively, other than perhaps the most important ingredient: The ISTS management team is committed to investing the time and energy required to address poor performance. This means working through a stage of structured remediation involving frequent—and sometimes unpleasant—meetings between the manager and the individual who is experiencing difficulties. Throughout this process, ISTS managers continuously evaluate the situation to recognize when it may have reached the point of no return.

**Workplace Safety**

A safe and professional workplace is a foundational element of the value proposition for people who work at ISTS. Workplace safety site audits are conducted regularly, and recommendations from those audits are acted on quickly. Risk assessments, contractor management processes, and safety training as part of the employee induction protocol are all elements of providing a safe and healthy workplace. Ergonomics is also a priority, with regular assessments and the provision of appropriate equipment for staff, including ergonomic chairs, footstools, mouse wrist pads, and more. The department has even placed live plants throughout the offices to provide color and to improve air quality in their fixed-window building.

UniSA’s central Office of Occupational Health, Safety, and Welfare (OHSW) is sufficiently impressed with ISTS’s wellness program that it is considering taking the program across...
the university. OHSW Manager Colin McLean says the university has a “duty of care” resulting from UniSA’s having the highest average age among its academic staff in Australia (49 years). With the expected change in the coming years of more people leaving the workforce than entering it, McLean feels wellness is a key to extending the productive and healthy life of academic and professional staff.

Lessons Learned

The Roman stoic Seneca reminds us that “luck is what happens when preparedness meets opportunity.” We conclude from our visit that UniSA is a very “lucky” institution. By that we mean the institution is creating its own luck: What UniSA has achieved is the result of vision, tenacity, and hard work. Its achievements are not in dispute: reaching the 13th spot in research funding within Australia in just 17 years, earning numerous awards for its workforce programs, and sustaining visionary leadership. That leadership not only withstood the perilous transition in the vice chancellor’s office but also benefited from it when newcomer Peter Høj “kicked it up a notch” by respecting and building on the strengths he inherited from Denise Bradley.

The institution is clearly doing many things well, and we are certain it will continue to improve. If there is one not-so-secret ingredient in the formula behind UniSA’s success, perhaps it is its holistic approach to recruiting, retaining, developing, and supporting its people. As we have said, UniSA has taken the familiar lofty rhetoric of the university’s vision statement and made it real.

The value UniSA places on people is apparent within the vice chancellor’s office and permeates the culture of the institution. These cultural values have given Sherlock and Loveday the foundation to take many of the university’s good workforce programs, apply and adapt them within ISTS, develop some of the programs even further, and then contribute those improvements back to the institution as a whole. It is a classic virtuous cycle—one that can only lead to greater success for UniSA. How will university officials know if they have succeeded? In the words of Høj, “I’ll know we are successful when we can say that UniSA is proud of every single one of its employees and all employees can say they are happy to be with UniSA.”

In many ways, the plan and achievements of UniSA are elegant in their simplicity. Unlike some cases that are technically complex or others that depend in part on unique institutional history or on resources that are not universally accessible in higher education, the initiatives undertaken by UniSA and their lessons and solutions are accessible to every college and university. Placing the accent on people at UniSA is not expensive. It is in fact good management in practice every day in a caring, yet formal, way. It is the sum total of a consistent message from the top that is modeled throughout the management cadre. It is the sum of small programs that are employee centered but never lose their focus on personal performance and pride, and on institutional vision and performance. The programs we reviewed were low on the sweetener that often accompanies human resources “interventions” and high on management engagement and sincerity—and the results of this systematic set of low-cost, commonsense initiatives are impressive. The ISTS organization is well respected within both UniSA and the Australian higher education sector. The good morale of this organization’s members is palpable. The focus on people—expressed through the formal programs of the ISTS organization—reveals an explicit compact between the institution and this group of employees. The employees of the ISTS unit are invested in and valued. In exchange, they are loyal to the organization and to the university, and they go the extra distance when called on.

This experience can be replicated. And in the increasingly competitive contest for talent, it is an experience worthy of study and replication.
Endnotes

1. In March 2008, the position title was revised to Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice President, Strategy and Planning. The change recognized important developments in Australia in the policy arenas of higher education and research, following the federal election of November 2007.

2. UniSA has been recognized as an Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace award winner every year since 2003, was named Public Employer of the Year in 2005, and in 2006 won the Diversity@work Employment and Inclusion Award for Work/Life Balance.


6. Ibid., 2.


Citation for This Work
