TOTAL RECALL?
RESEARCH INTO HOW MEMORY MAY BE MODIFIED

MILESTONE in quest for new anti-fungal drugs

Screen comedy & national identity
Appointments of Vice-Chancellor

La Trobe University has appointed Professor Brian Stoddart as interim Vice-Chancellor, following a decision by Professor Michael Osborne to bring forward his retirement after 15 years as Vice-Chancellor.

Professor Stoddart, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), came to La Trobe from Victoria University in November 2004 where he was substantively Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) but worked mainly as Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor. Prior to that he was Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and International) at the University of New England.

Professor Stoddart holds two degrees in modern history from the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, and a PhD in the modern history of India from the University of Western Australia.

An internationally acknowledged authority in sports history and sociology and a pioneer in the study of Australian sports culture, he is also well-known as a media commentator.

Professor Stoddart’s best-known works include Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture, and several works on the cultural history of Caribbean cricket.

He said he was ‘delighted to join La Trobe not that long ago because it has an outstanding reputation internationally, a product of Michael Osborne’s long and productive term.’

‘The University is in excellent health. Our finances are extremely sound, and major prospects like the medical school and the National Biosecurity Centre show that La Trobe has a fine future.

‘We have made a strong start on getting a tighter research focus, culminating in an additional $15 million for research over the next three years. The final pattern for investing that money will be shaped by the Research Quality Framework, but there will be additional support for research development, scholarships, attracting new staff and seeding initiatives.’

Professor Stoddart said teaching and learning was another ‘prime goal’ this year.

‘This will involve creating and approving new courses, enhancing support for instructional methodologies and infrastructure, and rewarding excellent teachers.’

He said La Trobe has an important regional dimension and that will figure strongly in debates about the University’s direction-setting.

‘The University’s new Strategic Plan will be driven by the determination that research, teaching and learning are our “core” business, and by the principle that strategies supporting that business will drive the budget, and not the other way round.

‘La Trobe has a strong reputation nationally and internationally. Like other Australian universities we have matters to deal with in the current climate of rapid change in higher education if we are to strengthen that reputation.’

New head of Albury-Wodonga campus

Dr Julie Jackson has been appointed Pro Vice-Chancellor and Director of La Trobe University’s Albury-Wodonga campus.

Dr Jackson – formerly Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibilities for Quality Enhancement and Community Engagement of the University – took up her post in January. She succeeded Professor John Hill, who retired from the University after 35 years, eleven of them at the Albury-Wodonga campus.

Dr Jackson is well-known in Albury-Wodonga, having served there as campus Deputy Director from 2000 to 2002.
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY researchers have passed a ‘significant milestone’ on the road leading to new anti-fungal drugs – after seven years of solid scientific laboratory effort.

For the first time they have synthesised a compound called Petriellin A, a peptide known to have anti-fungal properties. ‘Petriellin A may have properties which could lead to new anti-fungal drugs to treat immune-compromised patients such as those with HIV/AIDS, transplant patients, and some cancers. These patients have depressed immune systems and are prime targets for systemic fungal infections,’ says team leader Dr Andrew Hughes, Associate Professor and Reader in La Trobe’s School of Molecular Science.

‘But because it took about seven months by conventional methods to produce a tiny amount of Petriellin A by culturing it in the laboratory, and further time to purify it, it really was not a practical proposition as a source of the natural product for our research,’ Dr Hughes said.

‘We passed our milestone recently when PhD student Ms Marianne Sleebs completed a solid phase synthesis – a laboratory process by which significant quantities of synthesised Petriellin A can be “manufactured” in the laboratory in under two weeks.

Basically, this means now we can make and also change it. This in turn means we can test various permutations or analogues of the structure as potential clinical anti-fungal drugs. We don’t pretend that this will happen tomorrow but the road is now open for much more significant testing to take place,’ Dr Hughes said.

Ms Sleebs said she developed the method to synthesise Petriellin A, which involved solid phase strategies and special coupling reagents, by seeking paths which differed from the conventional process. ‘Essentially this means that instead of producing Petriellin A the conventional way in a solution, a long, slow and involved process, I succeeded in developing a way to do it using a solid resin.

‘Petriellin A is a highly modified peptide because it is N-methylated and it cannot be synthesised easily by conventional automated methods. By using my method, it was synthesised and this process can be scaled up,’ Ms Sleebs said.

While developing the new technique Ms Sleebs worked in conjunction with the company Peptide Solutions on La Trobe University’s Research & Development Park.

Peptide Solutions played critical roles in the solid phase synthesis strategy and final deprotection conditions and purification of the Petriellin A. ‘Dr Denis Scanlon and Mr John Karas from the company were fantastic collaborators, providing access to equipment and instruction on the subtle techniques required for the solid phase synthesis of this difficult peptide,’ said Ms Sleebs.

The current success followed work that began seven years ago when Honours, and later PhD student, Luigi Aurelio, working with Professor Bob Brownlee and Dr Andrew Hughes, first isolated Petriellin A and in collaboration with PhD student, Jason Dang set about determining its 3-D shape.

Continued page 15

US visitors to La Trobe Chemistry

TWO AMERICAN STUDENTS recently spent two months in a La Trobe University chemistry laboratory on research into new and more efficient anti-fungal drugs for HIV-AIDS patients. Crystal Sanchez and Emily Parry, final year students at San Diego State University, were supervised by Dr Andrew Hughes on research into a peptide called Aureobasidin G.

The compound, synthesised in Hughes’ laboratory, is similar to Petriellin A (see main story). Other peptides in the series are Cyclosporine, Aureobasidin I and Clavariopsin A.

Dr Hughes said the students were financed by the American Federal Government Minorities International Research Training program which helps people in minority groups go on to PhD studies in biomedicine.

Dr Hughes collaborates with Dr Shelli McAlpine from San Diego State University who lectured at La Trobe last year and arranged for the students to work in Dr Hughes’ laboratory.

Dr Hughes says anti-fungals on which he and Dr McAlpine are working offer a new mode of action. ‘Our compounds are generally of low toxicity and provide strong leads as potential drugs.’

Ms Parry said: ‘At home we work as one of a group in a structured environment, but at La Trobe we each conducted our own experiments. This taught us to think “outside the box”.

‘We were also surprised that there is no assigned time for laboratories here. We worked 40 hours a week, while at home we are assigned specific lab times.’
Beating the drum for social sciences in Australia

THE La Trobe University-based journal, Thesis Eleven, has been beating the drum for critical theory for 25 years – and today is one of the leading English language journals in its field.

Its research articles and commentary on key issues in social science, contemporary culture and politics have achieved widespread international recognition.

At a time when many academic journals are struggling financially, the journal is self-supporting with an influential readership in the thousands.

Professor of Sociology and Director of the University’s Thesis Eleven Centre, Peter Beilharz, is one of the journal’s founders and editors. He says Thesis Eleven reaches internationally across the social sciences and liberal arts, and cultivates a diversity of critical theories of modernity.

The centre regularly conducts events that attract international scholars – and its special 25th Anniversary seminar in December featured the President of the US Social Science Research Council, Professor Craig Calhoun, for a program on ‘American Civilization’.

Professor Beilharz said the seminar explored why Australians, and people from many other nations today, have a ‘love-hate relationship’ with the US. Until the sixties, in contrast, America was viewed as a new civilization, or as ‘The American Dream’.

‘Many people say they hate America, but scratch the surface and you find this great affinity with US culture. Maybe you like jazz, or American films, or their technology. A good illustration of this ambivalence is a bit of graffiti I saw in Mexico: “Yankee go home” – and beneath someone had written: “and take me with you”.

Professor Beilharz says the US and modernity go hand-in-hand. ‘For many people the US represents a capacity to remake themselves. While Australians admire many aspects of US popular culture, they don’t historically like inequality.

‘When you’re dealing with the fundamental intellectual questions of today, you can’t avoid looking at the US and, differently, Europe. For example welfare: do you have a minimal system like the US, or make better provisions like some European countries? Do you have Howard’s US-style industrial relations system or something more like Germany’s? Should we follow the American university system, or go our own way?’

Top: Critical theory rocks. Professor Beilharz draws on skills from a former life at the Thesis Eleven 25th ‘birthday party’ in December. Another band member was his son, Nikolai, a second-year media student at La Trobe. The lead singer on the night was well-known Melbourne rock musician, Chris Wilson.

Left: Professor Altman, in conversation with Gore Vidal, right, during a US book shop promotion for his new biography.

See also ‘Focus on the Future of Universities’, page 11.
‘For a long time it has been assumed that memory could be modified and rewritten, but up to now we have not understood how this process might work.’

**Memory – an unreliable tool for recalling**

Whenever we remember something we seem to have an almost unshakeable view that things occurred exactly as we recall them. This is not so, as many studies over the last 20 years have shown.

According to Professor Simon Crowe, Head of La Trobe University’s School of Psychological Science, memory can relatively easily be altered, re-written and we can quite easily be led to believe that things that did not actually happen did take place.

‘Clearly, the mechanism for this process of writing and re-writing memory is an important one and one that deserves study,’ Professor Crowe said.

Professor Crowe has received an ARC Discovery Grant of $160,000 to investigate the biological processing and re-processing of memory. The project title is ‘Remembering that things have changed’.

He said that the issue of memory accuracy has had its most frightening expression in legal and ethical disputes as a result of the debate over recovered memory – memory which has been unearthed a considerable time after the alleged events were thought to have taken place.

‘There have been cases where innocent individuals have been charged and convicted for childhood sexual abuse and satanic cult worship,’ Professor Crowe said.

‘The basis on which the memory process rests is that memory encoding and consolidation is not the same as video or tape recording. We are active players in the encoding of memory, not just in the original processing of the memory but also in what we choose to remember and the way in which we choose to remember it afterwards,’ he said.

Professor Crowe said that memory goes through two processes called consolidation and re-consolidation. ‘Consolidation is the encoding of the original memory of the event at the time that it first happened.

‘Reconsolidation is the process whereby the original memory changes as we recall and re-examine the memory at a later time. Reconsolidation allows the new context in which the memory is recalled to alter and add to the original memory by adding new components which occurred at the time that we reminisce.

‘An example is when family members gather at Christmas and recall past events they shared. Each member inevitably has a different version of the original event because each one makes additions or changes to that event.’

Professor Crowe has building on pioneering research by Professor Kim Ng and Dr Marie Gibbs at La Trobe 30 years ago into the behavioural, pharmacological and biochemical difference between consolidation and re-consolidation in the memory of day old chicks.

Day-old male chicks are used for humane memory testing techniques in which they peck at coloured beads coated with an unpleasant substance and then are required to recall later on whether a similar bead was the same colour as the original.

‘Using Ng’s and Gibbs’ original model, it is possible to identify a series of stages in the biochemical processing of memory which can be revealed by using pharmacological agents by systematically disrupting each of these.

‘Because the stages are relatively discrete and identifiable from each other, it is possible for recall to exist only up to the end of each stage before the amnesia rising from the pharmacological disruption of the next phase of a very practical outcome.

‘In the case of serious trauma like a near death experience, we could possibly revisit that event and rewrite that memory. The implication is that it might be possible for us to be able to change the contingencies associated with a particular memory.

‘It may be possible to manipulate the situation in which that memory took place so that on retrieval the memory would be less horrifying.

‘Associated with each of the experiences is a set of reinforcement contingencies which tell you whether what happened was a good thing (meaning you should do it again) or a bad thing (meaning that you should not). There is a biochemical mechanism which allows you to be able to identify outcomes as good or bad.

‘Generally speaking, good outcomes are associated with a flow of the neurotransmitter dopamine and bad outcomes are associated with the acute stress hormones including adrenaline and noradrenaline.

‘It may be possible for us to revisit the traumatic memory and change the neurotransmitter related contingencies associated with them, thus making the horrific event less horrifying.’

Professor Crowe said that apart from its possible benefit to the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, his research would address the fundamental scientific and practical problem of whether re-consolidation was a repetition of consolidation or a distinct process.
A REPORT by La Trobe University Law students has called on the Victorian government to enact new legislation to deal with abuses in the provision of finance through credit cards.

Based on their study into the impact of the law and social policy on Victorian credit consumers, it was prepared by senior law student researchers in association with the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service.

The report said vulnerable consumers should not be left to the mercy of those who profit from their inability to make ends meet. It highlighted over-commitment in the community from the use of credit, and claimed current legal provisions and their application provided insufficient protection for consumers against reckless lending.

‘This is predominantly the result of the fact that credit lenders are currently not required to assess the ability of their debtors to repay their debts with reference to their financial position at the time that an increase in credit is provided.’

The report also recommends greater regulation of services offered by fringe credit providers, like payday lenders.

La Trobe Law lecturer and Supervising Solicitor in Community Legal Education at the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service, Liz Curran, said student researchers, while on placement at the Legal Service, saw first-hand the impact on clients of financial hardship and reckless lending.

The report has been forwarded to government. It was written by Donna Curnow, Natasha Jankovska, Susanna Kirpichnikov and Elizabeth McGrath, as part of their clinical placement at the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service.


It said reversing the onus of proof in the new legislation was ‘ominously unjust’ and that its secrecy provisions would encourage lawlessness as a result of a ‘significant diminution of public discussion’.

‘The media are also affected as it brings into the process the criminalisation of those who provide information to journalists and the possibility of media being prosecuted for publication of those views.’

A report by a third group of students dealt with the Control of Weapons Act.

MOSAIC – a partnership between the La Trobe University Mother and Child Health Research Centre and other organisations to help new mothers and pregnant women in Melbourne’s north west – has been launched by the State Minister for Women’s Affairs, Ms Mary Delahunty.

‘The project will help disadvantaged and vulnerable women in the community,’ Ms Delahunty said. ‘It connects new mothers and mothers-to-be with women who have experienced the ups and downs of motherhood and can offer valuable support and advice. Having a mentor can be a powerful way of helping women reduce stress and gain confidence.’

An NHMRC funded community randomised trial based on a successful five-year pilot headed by Dr Angela Taft, Dr Rhonda Small and Professor Judith Lumley from the La Trobe Mother and Child Health Research Centre, the $470,000 project has the potential to help up to 350 women and their children.

Dr Taft said MOSAIC stands for ‘Mother’s Advocates in the Community’ and is being supported by more than 30 GPs and 90 maternal and child health workers who will be trained to identify women in need and refer them to MOSAIC staff who then link them to mentors.

Other partners in the project include the University of Melbourne, Divisions of General Practice, Women’s Health West, Women’s Health in the North and local governments.

Call for new laws against reckless lending

Mentoring scheme helps new mothers
WHEN YOU WATCH COMEDY on Australian television and in Australian movies, do you see a mirror image of Australia’s national identity?

As Australia changes, so does on-screen comedy but this leads to a conundrum. Do changes in comedy influence perceptions of national identity or do changing national outlooks change comedy?

A three-member La Trobe University research team has received a $300,000 ARC Discovery Grant over three years to research the way comedy portrays Australian national types and how it looks at aspects of the Australian way of life.

Dr Felicity Collins, a senior lecturer in Cinema Studies, Dr Sue Turnbull, Associate Professor in Media Studies, and postdoctoral fellow, Dr Susan Bye, believe an in-depth examination of our on-screen comedy will lead to a better understanding of how comic form and characters continue to influence ideas about our national character.

Drs Collins and Turnbull recently completed a project on ABC TV comedy under a La Trobe University-Industry Collaborative grant and the new research will build on this.

Dr Collins said the new project would explore how recurring comedy forms (sitcoms, sketch comedy, political satire) and comic characters (the ocker, larrikin, and battler) influence ideas about the national character, the Australian way of life, and national identity.

She said such influences were particularly important in the current post-national and multi-ethnic contexts.

‘Because perceptions of national identities change, we will examine how comic types also change over time, perhaps responding to different cultural policies and economic, social and political attitudes,’ Dr Collins said.

‘The project will look at why some Australian films like Crocodile Dundee and comedians like Barry Humphries and Paul Hogan succeed internationally while others, like Magda Szubanski, Andrew Denton, Ernie Dingo and Max Gillies, are household names in Australia but are less well-known abroad.

‘It will also look at how the portrayal of our lifestyle has changed – and how sometimes it has not changed – over half a century. For instance, in the 1970s and 80s Bazza McKenzie and Crocodile Dundee embodied the Ocker figure, while Dame Edna Everage, and much later Kath and Kim, portrayed our suburban lifestyle.

‘Why has comedy been central to national identity in Australia and how did this come about? We want to look at how this compares with other national cultures, for instance British comedy and its influence on British identity.

‘An important question we are examining is how multiculturalism affected the types portrayed. ’For example, Paul Hogan in Crocodile Dundee was successful even though his character was essentially a 19th century bushman living at the end of the 20th century. However, his relationship with the character played by Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil in the same film reflected changes in Australian culture.

‘That film was important for Australia’s international identity because at the time it was the most successful foreign film ever released in the USA. By contrast, The Castle which was a hit in Australia was not as successful overseas although it also dealt with contemporary, multicultural attitudes.’

Dr Collins said the organisation of the global film and television industry also had a bearing on the extent to which Australian films and television reached foreign audiences.

‘The global media market is dominated by five conglomerates including Murdoch’s Fox group and Time Warner, making it difficult for independent Australian producers of comedy to compete at home and overseas.’
A HONEYBEE can recognise an individual human face provided it has been properly trained.

The discovery in Europe by a team led by La Trobe University vision scientist Dr Adrian Dyer that a bee – with one hundredth of one per cent the number of neurons of a human brain – can recognise a human face, has surprised the world of vision science.

The research has at least partially answered the previously difficult question: how big does a brain need to be to solve this seemingly complex task?

Dr Dyer, currently based at Cambridge University, Professor Lars Chittka, a behavioural ecologist from Queen Mary, University of London, and Professor Christa Neumeyer, University of Mainz, Germany, set up a complex face recognition experiment for individual bees.

The result of their research was described in The Journal of Experimental Biology published in Britain last December.

Dr Dyer said that black and white photographs of human faces were attached to a round board, each with a tiny landing platform beneath it. On each platform was a small container, some containing a sucrose solution and others bitter quinine.

The bees which landed on the platform under one particular face were rewarded with a sucrose solution but punished with a drop of bitter quinine solution if they chose to visit a different face.

To ensure that the bees did not simply make a beeline for the same area of the board each time they were released, the photographs were repositioned so that the bees could not learn where the rewards were by location.

The bees soon learned to land on the platform under the face where they received the sucrose solution and to ignore the others.

After training was complete, the results were confirmed with unrewarded testing. Although the sucrose was removed, the bees still landed on the platform under the same face.

Dr Dyer said the level of recognition was impressive considering that the stimuli used for the experiments were taken from a standard face-recognition test for which human subjects experience a reasonable degree of difficulty.

‘The results in this study show that bees are capable of recognising human faces, despite having less than 0.01 per cent of the number of neurons found in the human brain.

‘The finding that small insect brains can solve this seemingly advanced cognitive task potentially will lead to the understanding of how relatively simple artificial systems – compared to the human brain – might reliably recognise faces.

‘Further testing showed that bees formed a long-term memory and were able to recognise the target face two days later,’ Dr Dyer said.

The study contributes to an area which has fascinated many scientists over the years: does the human brain require specialised regions to process faces reliably?

Professor Chittka explained that the experiments showed that the task of face recognition did not necessarily require specialised neuronal hardware.

‘Bees have evolved their pattern recognition skills in a completely different context, flower recognition, and have simply a wonderful flexibility in transferring these skills to other patterns, including facial ones.

‘Our results show that even a miniature brain can acquire face recognition as a learned expertise.’

Bees get to know the face that feeds them

"La Trobe University BULLETIN January February 2006"
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY’S LEADING role in space weather research – particularly on the effect of space weather storms – received a further lift recently with an ARC Discovery Grant to study energy deposition from solar winds.

The head of La Trobe’s Space Physics Group, Professor Peter Dyson, and two colleagues from Newcastle University, Associate Professor Frederick Menk and Dr Colin Waters, received $383,000 over three years.

The funds will help them to pursue research using the newly completed Tasman International Geospace Environment Radar (TIGER), an important Australian contribution to space physics, facilitating research and providing services for studies into space physics and space weather.

La Trobe’s Physics and Electronic Engineering Departments operate TIGER on behalf of a consortium of universities, government departments and commercial firms. TIGER includes a 300 metre long antenna installed on Bruny Island, Tasmania in 1999, and a similar one which began operation near Invercargill, NZ, in February last year.

The new grant will help fund the first research using the network created by combining the two antennae.

Professor Dyson said the expanded capacity of TIGER will be used to study complexities of energy deposition from the solar wind into Earth’s magnetosphere-ionosphere system.

He said TIGER will help map structures in the ionosphere and track their motion. A variety of processes such as reconnection between geomagnetic and interplanetary field lines, ultra-low frequency waves, and momentum transfer will be studied.

The objective is to identify the processes that produce phenomena that are currently not well understood, such as aspects of magnetic sub-storms and the transfer of energy from the auroral zone to lower latitudes.

The research will concentrate on the region on the equator side of the aurora that rings each polar region, looking at what drives changes in the upper atmosphere which occur during magnetic storms which affect solar wind so that region expands and contracts.

‘We need to know how far the aurora expands towards the equator and what its characteristics are in order to understand the whole thing,’ Professor Dyson said.

‘Our interest is the fundamental physics but the practical applications of being able to predict space weather are very important. Australia has a government department, IPS Radio and Space Services, whose job is to do that because it impacts, for example, on communications in a number of areas,’ he said.

Benefits of the research will include improved ability to observe, understand and predict space weather impacts on Australia’s communications, navigation, and surveillance capabilities. These include communications with aircraft, GPS navigation, and prospecting using magnetic techniques.

It will also support specific Australian programs such as the JORN, the over-the-horizon radar coastal surveillance system, and space weather monitoring activities.

‘In addition it will continue to provide Australia with a central role in the multi-nation SuperDARN project that continues to pioneer new initiatives in successful radar network operations for scientific studies and for the development of space weather data products for monitoring agencies and other scientists.

‘This is the first grant we have had to do science with the two radars operating fully. TIGER’s capability is now greatly enhanced with each radar emitting beams that cross, giving different line of sight velocities that can be combined to provide accurate “vector” velocities of motions in the highly disturbed auroral ionosphere,’ Professor Dyson concluded.
Health Care: Good people management means good results

Victorian hospitals focusing on good people management have more cost effective outcomes.

However, there is often a discrepancy between the importance that CEOs say they attach to good people management and its translation into organisational practice.

These facts came to light in a major survey of Victorian health care organisations by La Trobe University in conjunction with the Victorian Hospitals Industrial Association (VHIA).

Led by Dr Pauline Stanton, an Associate Professor in La Trobe’s Graduate School of Management, and Dr Timothy Bartram from the School of Business, the research team comprised La Trobe staff members Professor Raymond Harbridge, Ms Terese Garreffa, and Dr Sandra Leggat (School of Public Health) and Mr Benjamin Fraser (School of Business).

Dr Stanton said: ‘The survey has convinced us that there are opportunities for better approaches to people management within the sector but these opportunities are being missed.’

The project was supported by an advisory group of human resource directors from the major tertiary hospitals and funded by La Trobe University and VHIA.

In 2004, questionnaires about people management practices and initiatives were sent to chief executive officers, human resource directors and senior managers in more than 130 Victorian health care facilities.

These included strategic human resource management, workforce planning, recruitment and selection, occupational health and safety, managing diversity, employee participation and empowerment, performance management, equal employment opportunity, learning and development, staff support, industrial relations, human resource outcomes and performance indicators.

Dr Stanton said the aim was to explore the use of strategic human resource management practices in the Victorian public health care sector.

‘We defined strategic human resource management as the alignment of human resource functions to the strategic goals of the organisation. A key objective was to explore the link between human resource management and organisational performance by surveying organisational practice across the sector,’ Dr Stanton said.

‘The project found that human resource management was often under emphasised and under resourced, focusing largely on transactional functions such as payroll, leave administration, dispute resolution and recruitment.

‘This means that strategic issues such as the integration of people management practices with organisational strategy, and the impact on organisational performance were given a lower priority.

‘Because of this, improved performance potential is not realised. Even when hospitals do measure their people management outcomes, they rarely report it back to their decision making bodies and act on any findings.’

Dr Stanton said health care system depended on their people. How they are managed strongly influences the costs incurred, the quality of service delivery and patient outcomes.

She said that despite continuing shortages of many health care professionals, the study suggested that while CEOs and the human resource directors stressed a strategic human resource management package, operational level managers took a narrower view, directing efforts towards the recruitment of new staff rather than on the retention of existing staff.

The study found that human resources was a largely under resourced function across all divisions of health care organisations. Three quarters of responses suggested that the major barriers to effectively practicing strategic human resource management in their organisation were inadequate funding, limited resources, and inadequate human resource management specialist staff.
Focus on the future of universities

Universities, challenged by a variety of social forces, are undergoing a deep transformation in both their internal structure and their relationship to the rest of society.

This transformation is central to a more general intensification of social inequality, privatisation of public institutions, and reorganisation of access to knowledge.

These comments came from one of the world’s leading social scientists, Professor Craig Calhoun, who visited La Trobe University recently as keynote international speaker at a special forum dealing with the future of universities.

The seminar was organised by the University’s Thesis Eleven Centre for Social Theory, named after the highly successful Australian journal of social theory, Thesis Eleven, that celebrated its 25th anniversary late last year. (See page 4.)

Professor Calhoun – President of the US Social Science Research Council and Professor of Sociology and History at New York University – said for universities to be effective institutions for the public good, required ‘not merely a defence of old habits or an embrace of new trends’.

‘We need a stronger analysis of how universities can be public, how funding shapes possibilities, what kinds of benefits can be achieved, how they are distributed and – perhaps most basically – how this can be addressed reflexively, in public discussion both within universities and on national and international levels.’

Co-presenter of the seminar was leading Australian higher education commentator, Professor Simon Marginson, recently appointed to the Editorial Board of Thesis Eleven.

Professor Marginson said Australia was the only nation in the OECD group of advanced countries that between 1995 and 2002 ‘both markedly increased private funding of tertiary education while markedly reducing public funding of tertiary education’.

‘Most of this private income is fed back into the business functions of universities, to keep the revenues flowing, rather than the core activities of teaching and research. This has skewed the priorities of universities. Some seem to have lost their way.

‘Now let me add that La Trobe has not entirely succumbed to this. In this university intellectual values are often stronger than is the case in most Australian universities.’

Professor Marginson said old definitions of the ‘public good’ and ‘public service’ were in eclipse. ‘But we have yet to settle on a new social consensus about the role of public universities let alone to resource it.

‘The Australian government seems to imagine that by stratifying universities between the research strong, the research weaker and the research non-existent, using university rankings and league tables, and introducing full fees for undergraduates supported by subsidised tuition loans, it will somehow replicate the peaks of the American system.

‘There is no evidence that stratifying higher education between high and low quality institutions and ramping up the competition leads to better teaching or research. None.

‘What we do know about inter-university competition between universities as producers of private goods, from the American experience, is that university incomes become squandered on the costs of competition itself.’

Universities had already become more efficient and responsive, but were now developing by ‘thinning out their long term capacity in teaching and research’. He concluded with a call for ‘a new consensus on the common benefits that universities create’.

Reinvigorating public social science

Professor Calhoun’s presidency, the Social Science Research Council in the US had been ‘reinvigorated as a leader of public social science and research into critical social issues’.

Professor Calhoun’s own research interests range from knowledge institutions, innovation, information technology, HIV/AIDS and social transformation to media, democracy and the public sphere.

Language death - and the ‘creoloids’ we leave behind

LANGUAGE DEATH is a major concern for linguists and scholars world-wide. Many, including those at La Trobe University’s Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (RCLT) – one of the key centres for international language conservation – are busily documenting these languages before the last speakers die.

Estimates are that somewhere between 50 to 90 per cent of the world’s languages will cease to exist by the end of this century. To this bleak prediction Professor Peter Trudgill, a Visiting Fellow at the RCLT, has added an even gloomier one: those that remain may not qualify as ‘real typical languages’.

Professor Trudgill, who holds appointments at the universities of East Anglia in the UK and Fribourg in Switzerland, recently delivered a public lecture, Creoloids and koinés: on the world-wide loss of linguistic complexity.

If modern dominant languages are no longer typical of languages that existed throughout human history, why should that matter? Apart from cultural consequences for those who lose their languages, sociolinguistic patterns – critical links between aspects of a society and its language – help us learn about the world in which we live.

A pioneer of sociolinguistics (his books of the 1970s are still standard texts in the field) Professor Trudgill says that if the distribution of linguistic features over the world’s languages is not totally random, then these features are associated with certain types of societies and structures.

Linguistic change, he explains, is slow when populations are well established and bound by strong ties. It is rapid among fluid populations with weak community ties. Language structures are usually lost during language contact and more readily developed in isolation.

‘Increasing communication and larger populations lead to more language and dialect contact and an increase in new language forms known as creoles, creoloids and koinés. Most languages are in danger, and the ones left behind will be mainly koinés or creoloids.

‘If we are keen to learn more about the inherent nature of linguistic systems, we must urgently focus most our attention on languages spoken in the ever-dwindling numbers of small, isolated, communities with tightly-knit social networks that remain in the modern world.’

Professor Trudgill was awarded an honorary doctorate from La Trobe University during his two months stay at the RCLT for his groundbreaking contributions to the advancement of linguistic knowledge.

An expert on English as an international language as well as other languages and dialects, he has carried out detailed studies of the dialects of the British Isles and of American and New Zealand English. His insights have been featured on radio programs in six countries and on television.

He has also studied the development of Modern Greek and Norwegian, endangered Albanian dialects in Greece, sociolinguistics in several regions of Europe, pidgin and creole languages, linguistic geography, and the diffusion of linguistic features in language contact.

His research has illuminated every-day concerns from the social implications of how countries with large immigrant populations like Australia and Britain teach English to diverse ethnic groups, to the way in which British pop singers were less inclined to use American pronunciation after the rise of the Beatles.

Particularly well-known for his research into standard and non-standard dialects of English and their implications for educational policies, he has published more than 30 books including the seminal work, Sociolinguistics, first released in 1974.

He has also published on ‘Sex, covert prestige, and linguistic change’, work which, among other things, highlights that how people speak reflects how they are treated.

Professor Trudgill says from an educational point of view ‘the position of Standard English as the dialect of English used in writing is unassailable’, stressing, however, that this has ‘nothing whatsoever to do with spelling or punctuation’.

As far as spoken Standard English is concerned, he says teaching it to speakers of other dialects may be commendable – if for no other reason than the discrimination against non-standard dialect speakers in most English-speaking societies. But he doubts such aims are feasible.

As well as having examined linguistic features of pop songs, he shared his problems in visiting his wife’s homeland in a best-selling volume: Coping with America: a beginner’s guide to the USA. Short-listed for the Thomas Cook travel book prize, it has also been translated into French and Portuguese.
A leading researcher in mental health nursing and workplace relations in the nursing profession, Dr Gerald Farrell, has been appointed Professor of Nursing and Head of the School of Nursing and Midwifery at La Trobe University.

Currently Professor and Head of the School of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Tasmania, where he has worked since the early 1990s, Professor Farrell takes up his post at La Trobe in March 2006.

Professor Farrell is keen to further develop multidisciplinary research, promote the internationalisation of the curriculum, and enhance the partnerships between academics and clinicians that champion the relevance and reputation of courses.

Professor Farrell has about 15 years experience as a practising psychiatric nurse and educator at Littlemore Hospital and John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford. He holds a Diploma of Nursing from the University of London, an MSc in Social Research, University of Surrey, and a PhD in Social Science from the University of Tasmania. With extensive teaching experience in Australia and the UK, where he lectured at Oxford Brooks University, Professor Farrell has taught mental health nursing and research methods and, more recently, communication skills for Bachelor of Nursing undergraduates. He has also supervised a wide range of postgraduate research.

Professor Farrell is involved in the nursing profession at both national and international levels. Until recently he was a member of the Executive Committee, Deans of Nursing and Midwifery (Australia and New Zealand), and is a reviewer for a number of international nursing journals.

His recent research projects include a collaborative study of staff relationships in the workplace, conducted with industry colleagues and the Australian Nursing Federation, which involved a survey of all nurses in Tasmania. Professor Farrell also is pursuing projects with a UK expert in Clinical Psychology, to investigate patients’ demand for medical care in the absence of physical pathology, in addition to exploring the management of other ‘challenging behaviours’ amongst patients and colleagues at work.

Honours for Inga Clendinnen

La Trobe University Emeritus Scholar, historian and author, Inga Clendinnen, has been made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in this year’s Australia Day Honours List for ‘addressing issues of fundamental concern to Australian society and contributing to shaping public debate on conflicting contemporary issues’.

The award comes after she received one of Australia’s leading literary prizes, the 2005 Medal of the Australian Society of Authors, announced late last year.

Awarded every two years to recognised authors for their contribution to Australian public life, it was last won by Tim Winton in 2003.

Dr Clendinnen is ‘an internationally recognised historian and writer whose work continues to surprise readers with its depth of knowledge and breadth of interests’ the award citation says. She demonstrates ‘extraordinary research skills, empathy for others and a dedication to the craft of writing,’

A leading scholar on Aztec and Mayan cultures, Dr Clendinnen taught at La Trobe University for 20 years.

Her books include Reading the Holocaust, a New York Times ‘Best Book of the Year’ in 1999 and winner of the New South Wales Premier’s General History Award. Tiger’s Eye, was published in 2000, as was True Stories, based on her ABC Boyer Lectures about Indigenous lives.

Last year Dr Clendinnen was the first Australian awarded the US-based Kiriyama Prize for non-fiction for her book, Dancing with Strangers (2003), which deals with the first years of European settlement in New South Wales and also won the NSW Premier’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction.

The Society of Authors award coincided with another honour – the launch at the National Library in Canberra of a celebratory volume on Dr Clendinnen’s contribution to writing and scholarship. The volume features contributions by La Trobe Professor of History, Alan Frost, and Adjunct Professor of English, Morag Fraser.

Appointments to Academy of Social Sciences

Professor John King of the School of Business and Dr Diane Kirkby, a Reader in the History, have been appointed Fellows of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

Professor King was cited as a highly regarded researcher in labour economics, Marxian economics and the history of economic theory. He is editor of the History of Economics Review.

Dr Kirkby was noted for her outstanding record of innovative scholarship and publication in fields that cross cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Her prize-winning biography, Alice Henry, provided a new synthesis of Australian and American history. She was instrumental in the formation of the Australian and New Zealand Law and History Society and is its past president.
Prize-winning cancer research

Research from three La Trobe University speech pathology students recently swept the board at the Australia and New Zealand Head and Neck Cancer Society meeting in Sydney.

Ruth White, Honours student in the School of Human Communication Sciences, won the scientific paper prize of $500 for her presentation of ‘Reliability and validity of tongue pressures as a measure of swallowing in people with Head and Neck cancer’.

Jessica Bibby, Honours student, presented the results of the first large cohort study to examine ‘Voice outcomes after radiotherapy treatment for early laryngeal cancer patients in Victoria’.

Professor Alison Perry, Chair in Human Communication Sciences at La Trobe, says this study has laid the benchmark for measurement of voice outcomes in patients with larynx cancer.

Jacqui Frowen, PhD student, presented a systematic review of the literature examining swallowing outcomes after radiotherapy for Head and Neck cancer, demonstrating the lack of data for treatment outcome of this important variable.

She then described her own x-ray study, which uses videofluoroscopy at the baseline treatment (pre-cancer) stage and again at six months after treatment, to objectively document changes in swallowing impairment.

The research projects result from a collaboration between Professor Perry and Dr June Corry, Radiation Oncologist at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne.

Professor Perry says the collaboration enables quality clinical research and joint academic-clinical teaching for La Trobe communication sciences students.

Senior clinical speech pathologist at the Peter MacCallum Centre, Ms Louise Dobbie, is employed via La Trobe to facilitate the University’s on-site clinical research at the Centre.

Achievement in business education awards

La Trobe University featured prominently in the latest Business-Higher Education Round Table (B-HERT) awards, taking out three prizes. With collaborators in the Victorian Public Health Training Scheme, La Trobe’s School of Public Health won the Best Education and Training Prize.

The scheme enables specialists in five participating organisations to work in the other participating organisations to gain experience and to share expertise.

La Trobe’s Office of Engagement and Enterprise at the Bendigo campus won a key regional award for its collaboration with Alfa Laval, OlivOz and the International School of Oil Masters in launching a processing facility that will serve as a research centre for all stages of the olive oil process, contributing to local economic growth through increased earnings for olive growers and processors.

La Trobe’s Archaeology Program and the company Godden Mackay Pty Ltd received an honourable mention for their long-term collaboration in teaching and research which has involved two major urban archaeological excavations. The scheme’s management and training outcomes have attracted international interest.

B-HERT membership comprises Australian universities, corporations, professional associations and major public research organisations. Its objective is to improve the performance of both business and higher education for the benefit of Australian society.
Career change to boost trade skills

METAL fabricator and welder, Karen O’Reilly, has spent 15 years helping build frigates and working on other large projects for shipyards and engineering firms.

Set on career change, she completed a Graduate Diploma in Vocational Education and Training at La Trobe University, and this year goes on to do her Masters degree in Education – testament to the opportunities for people in trades to move into teaching.

Ms O’Reilly has also won the 2005 National International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS) Overseas Fellowship in ‘pipe fitting’ and ‘design and creativity’. She was one of 21 people from a range of industries to receive the prestigious award late last year which aims to fill skills gaps for industry.

The award sponsors her to travel and work overseas this year to hone further her specialist skills in metal fabrication and pipefitting – skills that are in short supply across Australia.

‘There are no training courses available in Australia for pipe fitters,’ she says, ‘yet industry is crying out for people with pipe fitting skills. The fellowship will enable me to see training initiatives overseas with the view of enhancing curriculum development in Australia.’

The ISS award capped a rewarding year for Ms O’Reilly who was offered and accepted a VET teaching position midway through her course.

For her Masters degree at La Trobe she will pursue research in curriculum creativity and design in trades and the role of women in non-traditional trade areas.

‘The beauty of these courses at La Trobe is that you can continue to work while you study, as classes are offered at weekends and during vacation,’ she says.

Dr Damon Cartledge, senior lecturer in Adult, Vocational and Technology Education, says there are significant shortages of technology and design teachers in secondary schools and TAFE colleges across Australia.

‘Opportunities for people in trades and industry to move into teaching have never been better.

‘Schools are courting us for graduates and many of our students receive job offers before they complete their course.’

Dr Hughes said that the medical profession needed more anti-fungal drugs which operated in new ways. ‘Bugs continually work on ways to resist drugs and often succeed. Drugs that operate in new ways have an advantage because the bugs have not developed strategies to resist them.

‘Drugs developed from Petriellin A may be able to deal with systemic infections in a different way. Now that Marianne has got us across the synthetic line we can begin the first steps in “drug discovery” – literally making drugs that are effective in new ways,’ he said.

Dr Hughes and Ms Sleebs are currently preparing a paper on their research for publication in an international journal.

Milestone in quest for new anti-fungal drugs

Continued from page 3

Ms Sleebs working on the new anti-fungal drug

Award recognises work with women in prison

SECOND YEAR Bachelor of Legal Studies student, Ms Jiselle Hanna of Thornbury, has won the La Trobe University – Westpac Banking Corporation Award for 2005. The $1,000 prize recognises both sound academic progress and involvement in community service.

Ms Hanna works with women in prison, through the Advocacy Program for Women in Prison at the Fitzroy Legal Service, a state-wide organisation helping female prisoners with welfare and legal issues.

Ms Hanna has assisted more than 40 women, dealing with complaints relating to human rights issues, including provision of adequate medical care, unauthorised cell searches and arbitrary disciplinary procedures. After women are released from prison, Ms Hanna’s work revolves around housing needs, employment, education, family reunification, drug and alcohol counselling and life skills.

Justice does not always prevail, says Ms Hanna, and poverty is often the greatest barrier to people’s ability to get their lives back on track.

She plans to transfer to a combined Bachelor of Laws/Legal Studies course and eventually pursue a legal career to help fill some of the gaps that exist in service provision.
Music ‘therapy’ may partly explain its wide appeal:

**Rebetica, the ‘globalised blues’ of Greece**

Music ‘therapy’ may partly explain its wide appeal:

Rebetica, also known as Piraeus blues, have become a popular and lucrative element of world music over the last 20 years. Melbourne, as Australia’s most Greek city, boasts several rebetica bands and has long been a centre of scholarship on the genre.

Professor Stathis Gauntlett, Head of Greek Studies in the School of Historical and European Studies at La Trobe University, has been researching rebetica and other Greek oral traditions since 1970.

He is the author of a well-reviewed book published in Greek in Athens in 2001, Rebetica Songs. A contribution to a scholarly approach.

He also helped compile the entries for the words ‘rebetica’ and ‘rebetis’ (the hero of the songs) for the on-line Oxford English Dictionary, taking into account 80 years of documented usage in English and a range of spellings.

Recently invited to contribute an article on rebetica to the Athenian journal Archaeologia kai Technes, for an issue devoted to suicide in Greece, Professor Gauntlett decided to test another cross-cultural parallel with rebetica.

In a paper titled Rebetico Noir, he explored parallels between rebetica and blues. ‘Rebetica are basically songs of complaint, deploring everything from the behaviour of one’s lover to the weather.

‘American blues complain of similar things. There’s an old saying that if you play blues backwards, your woman comes home, you get out of jail, and your dog comes back to life. Mutatis mutandis, if you play rebetica backwards, you become a total abstainer with the help of the woman who drove you to drink or drugs in the first place, people stop picking on you – notably the police – and your mother smiles for the first time since the day you were born.

‘This gives some idea of how the themes and social milieu of rebetica connect also with “art noir”.

‘Rebetica tell hard-luck stories – the plight of victims, ranging from those unlucky in love, unwilling migrants, invalids and the dispossessed to prisoners, vagabonds and small-time criminals.

‘As in film noir, the colour black dramatically permeates the visual landscape of rebetica verses. The Greek adjective “mavros” is applied to a wide range of nouns, both concrete and abstract (life, soul, fate, prison, exile); even the intoxicant of preference in rebetica is hashish, “the little black stuff”.

‘Black is also the basis of the sartorial code of the protagonist rebetis, his mourning mother-figure, and “Charos”, the lurking grim reaper. Even the mandatory femme fatale has a “black” heart.

‘If rebetica form the soundtrack to twentieth-century Greece, the implied film would surely be a rather melodramatic film noir. It’s a paradox that in a country boasting more than 300 days of blinding sunlight per annum, the most popular songs should be set at night or under cloudy skies,’ he added.

‘That tells you something about modern Greek history, which has featured a brutal Nazi occupation, several dictatorships, five years of ferocious civil war, and the aftermath of ethnic cleansing on a massive scale. It’s not surprising that rebetica often contain indictments of an oppressive society, but also express despair at the human condition.

‘Curiously though, only a handful of rebetica speak openly of suicide. Perhaps it’s because the rebetis tends to direct his aggression against others rather than himself. Perhaps it’s because suicide was illegal in Greece, and pre-emptive censorship applied to sound recordings in Greece from 1937.

‘But then again, some songs talk of music as a cure for depression, particularly when played on the bouzouki, the rebetica instrument par excellence. The instrumental interludes in recorded rebetica are indeed often incongruously cheerful and uplifting, even in the most desperate songs. This music therapy may partly explain the global appeal of rebetica!”