



# New player set to create ripples in public policy pond

ACU think tank established to respond to today's real challenges, **SCOTT PRASSER** writes

**T**he Australian Catholic University will this month launch the Public Policy Institute as a new centre of excellence for applied research to inform and influence Australian public policy. Its work will be undertaken within the context of the university's identity and mission. It will be small, expert and targeted.

ACU National has recognised that increasing government intervention in our society is having wide-ranging impacts – both intended and unintended – on people, attitudes and our future. Real challenges loom about the nature, extent and form of this intervention and what sort of society we might become and what sort of society we really want.

Establishing the Public Policy Institute in Canberra is the university's response to these challenges. It reflects the belief that modern universities need to be more than just teaching and research institutions. But the institute will not just be another university-based body doing long-term research on esoteric topics. While the institute's work must be grounded in independent rigorous research, it will be taking a more active role in policy debates, focusing on identifying critical emerging issues, leading debate and contributing to the public discourse to ensure a fuller range of views are in the policy mix.

In addition, the institute will be more active in its engagement with the community and key decision makers than some other bodies. This is a necessity for research to be better informed, for its findings to be widely disseminated and for practical solutions to be developed.

While there are many think-tanks and policy research centres in several universities, the institute, given its

ACU National base, has a special niche and role in policy debate. Some may be critical the institute takes a particular approach to policy issues. We hope so, because despite the rhetoric about "evidence-based" policy, much of what is produced by think tanks inside and outside universities and in and around government reflects particular perspectives that are not always clearly or honestly articulated. It is often policy advocacy parading as independent research.

Public policy debates and government action cannot be distilled into a simplistic concept of "evidence-based" policy. Public policy must be informed by research and "evidence" but what to do about an issue in practical terms requires consideration of values. As one analyst commented, politics and policy are "most effective when based on truths, but there are an infinite number of truths".

So a major role of the institute is to ensure values form a significant backdrop in defining the nature of problems and developing ethical and socially sustainable solutions.

ACU National is serious about contributing to public policy. The institute has been deliberately located in Canberra. Access to the nation's key institutions and the ability to develop dialogues with senior decision makers in government, business and key community groups are best facilitated by being based in the nation's capital.

Nevertheless, the institute will remain concerned about the seemingly remorseless shift in Australian politics that sees the national government as the dominant driver of public policy. Aided by ACU National's location in

six campuses across three states and the ACT, and its Australia-wide networks in education, health and social services, the institute will be in a good position to connect to wider regional concerns and broader social interests. The institute will have a small academically qualified staff and will include public policy practitioners. Staff will be supported by research fellows gaining their qualifications through the university while sharpening their applied skills through involvement in institute projects.

The institute will be collaborative in working with other universities on joint projects and with Commonwealth, State and local government agencies to better understand current policy challenges. Through sponsored forums with stakeholders and experts, the institute will seek to connect to key interests and in some instances, lead debate. Research, discussion papers and books will also ensure ideas are exposed and disseminated to wide audiences. And through active and ongoing public commentary on important issues, the institute intends to enliven public policy debate, to add something to policy development in Australia.

The institute may not make big waves in the public policy pond but it hopes at least to create a few ripples so another perspective on key areas of public policy gains attention and possibly action. It is our view that it is the diversity of views that makes for real policy innovation needed to confront the challenges facing Australia now and in the future.

■ **Professor Scott Prasser is Foundation Executive Director and Professor of ACU National's new Public Policy Institute.**