

Session 8

TAKING A CHANCE ON RANDOM IDEAS

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Recognising serendipitous opportunity is a challenge! It can be missed in a heartbeat. And when the opportunity is seen for what it is, the next challenge is to know what to make of it.

In the work of maintaining the daily operation of a university and pursuing strategy, recognising serendipitous opportunity is difficult. Being able to train ourselves in such a skill may be unlikely, but providing the right setting for serendipitous opportunity to emerge and to be grasped is possible and desirable. Indeed, a university is the perfect place to foster an atmosphere where serendipity can be harnessed.

Following an alternative line of thought is something encouraged in research, but how often is it adopted in the administration and management of an institution? Seemingly random ideas can emerge in all areas of endeavour of a university and it is important to give people the room to explore these ideas and see where they might go – to a dead end or startling success.

To foster and harness serendipity, the atmosphere within a university must allow people to feel that they can pursue a line of thought that has emerged from an unlikely source or is just a bit off the beaten track – the random idea. To achieve this setting, an institution needs to provide freedom and demonstrate trust in the ability and motivation of its staff.

This presentation will look at how fostering an atmosphere throughout a university that encourages the pursuit of the serendipitous conversation or interaction can be of significant benefit to an organisation.

It will include a case study on a series of innovative investments entered into by The University of Western Australia – the genesis of which was a combination of the serendipitous opportunity provided by a few random ideas and the challenge of WA's geographical isolation. This investment - this 'taking a chance' – has developed into a successful and high profile program that has served to significantly increase the engagement of UWA with the political and business leaders of the Asian region.

Presenters Biography

Madeleine King graduated with a law degree from The University of Western Australia in 1997. She spent 7 years as a commercial lawyer in private practice both with a national law firm in Perth and in an international law firm in Europe. After returning to Perth, Madeleine took up the position of Research Contracts Lawyer at The University of Western Australia in 2005. In 2008, she was appointed as Chief of Staff at UWA where she manages the operation of the Vice-Chancellery and provides advice to the Vice-Chancellor and members of the Executive on strategy and major policy issues relating both to internal University business and to the higher education sector in general.