Therese (Tess) Howes
Sydney University, Australia

Leading strategic planning in universities: case studies from Australia (0055)

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Background

Publicity surrounding recent public protests by academics and students at Sydney University and publications such as Bessant (1995, 2002), Coady (2000), Meyers (2012), Hil (2012) and Coaldrake & Stedman (2013) indicate widespread conflict between academic and executive staff in Australian universities. Open correspondence to Sydney's Vice-Chancellor, from Professor Connell, a leading educationalist and co-author of one of the volumes on the history of Sydney University, part published in the *Australian newspaper* and uploaded on a university web site, reveals deep divisions between academics and the university executive.

> University staff don't take industrial action lightly … a strike rarely has a single cause. It generally grows from a build-up of frustrations, setbacks and conflicts that result in a loss of trust in management … there is something at stake here beyond staff morale and a particular log of claims. The future character of our university system is involved. The staff on the picket line here are the people involved in building universities for the twenty-first century, in practice as well as in imagination [March 2013].

Another article published in the *Australian* in May reported that the Sydney University Development Office raised $160 million in 2011- 2012, a record in philanthropic investment in Australian universities (*Australian*, p29). Connell argues that in 2011-2012 Sydney University, one of the *'richest'* universities in Australia, embarked on a significant academic staff redundancy program *"wrecking the livelihoods of valued colleagues … undermining security for all staff"* (March, 2013).

It would be an over simplification to suggest that strategic planning is the sole cause of this conflict. However, the findings of this study indicate that strategic planning generates many organisational tensions between the executive and academics that makes a significant contribution to the hostility which seems to be characteristic of academic life.

Strategic Planning

Scholarly literature on strategic leadership and planning in universities can be grouped into five areas: individual case studies that describe the implementation of successful strategic change initiatives (Dyson, 2004; Marshall, 2007); practical information for higher education leaders and managers (Kottler & Murphy 1981; Keller, 1983, Shattock, 2010a, 2010b; plus numerous articles in the International Encyclopedia of Education 2010); comprehensive overviews of the changing higher education context to explain why Australian universities need to improve their strategic leadership and planning capabilities (Ramsden, 1998; Sharrock 2007, 2012; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998, 2013); the development of the entrepreneurial university and the impact this has had on academic autonomy (Marginson & Considine, 2000); as well as protests about the influence managerialism has had on Australian universities (Bessant, 1995, 2002; Hil, 2012, Meyers, 2012). A common theme throughout the literature is a real or perceived polarisation of the values of academic work and management.

> Successful universities are successful primarily because of their teaching and research, not because of their management, but good management, including good leadership, can over time provide the conditions in which teaching and research can flourish, just as more usually, poor management can undermine teaching and research and precipitate institutional decline (Shattock, 2010a).

Australian universities are not immune from social, economic and political forces, and must find ways to manage large scale change and plan for an uncertain future. However publications critical of university planning decisions, namely Coady (2000) and Meyers (2012) were rejected by mainstream university publishing houses. In the case of Coady, chapters were submitted by leading academics and prominent Australian intellectuals; many had associations with the University of Melbourne, yet Melbourne University Press refused to publish the book. Fraser's chapter reports a number of reprisals against outspoken academics who were critical of university decisions which added a layer of fear in the publication process (p. 246-247). Staff contributing to the Coady publication were taking an employment risk to contribute to a book that featured comments such as "*When academics are afraid to speak out*" … "*How Melbourne Uni muzzled mild dissent*" on the front cover.

A recent study examined the strategic mission statements of Australian universities to identify ways to improve engagement between management and academic staff, suggesting that the "wise managerial leader, then, will patiently and persistently ask of themselves and their colleagues: Are we being *collegial* enough? *engaged* enough? *strategic* enough? *systematic* enough?" (Sharrock, 2012).

One of the key tasks for strategic leaders is to establish a shared vision that is aligned to the core values of the organisation to guide the planning process. If the core organisational values are not shared it will be very difficult to conduct an effective strategic planning process (Shattock, 2010b). Yet, Sir Colin Renshaw Lucas, former Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University predicts that "… The future lies in 'very smart planning, highly skilled choice making and determining a strategic focus'" (cited Bosetti and Walker, 2010, p.17).

Peter Coaldrake, Vice-Chancellor of Queensland University of Technology, and Lawrence Stedman's publication *Raising the Stakes: gambling with the future of universities (2013)* attempts to refute several sector wide 'myths' including two that are relevant to this topic:

- "university vice-chancellors are spineless and complicit in the destruction of public universities and need to be more effective lobbyists for more funding; and

- universities can regain their golden age by resisting the forces of neo-liberalism and managerialism" (p.8).

The authors concede that Australian academics are some of the least content in the world suggesting that:

"the messiness of the current situation can be addressed *only by better planning*, or by more reform aimed at teasing apart the different parts of the university 'value chain' and opening up the university black box to external scrutiny … " (p.7).

This paper presents three case studies from Australia, opening the 'black box' of experience to scrutiny as Coaldrake and Stedman recommend. The participants are all members of the professoriate with a range of disciplinary backgrounds from different universities. They discuss their experiences with a reflective frankness made possible by anonymity and suggest new ways to lead strategic planning to improve organisational outcomes. More research is needed to identify collaborative strategic planning approaches that promote academic engagement and organisational resilience rather than organisational dysfunction.

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