

# What's Hot & What's Not in the Strategic Plans of Australia's Universities

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In recent years, the Australian Government has removed the national *Office for Learning and Teaching* and is steering budget cuts to universities, coupled with forecasted increases to student fees. In this context, universities are encouraged to identify and articulate distinctive identities and unique value propositions. This paper aligns with the Conference Theme of *Governance and Policy*. The key question addressed in this paper is – what are the common and unique learning and teaching goals and plans of Australia's universities. The strategic plans, as the key governance documents, of 40 universities were thematically analysed according to the ten educational change trends identified by the *2017 Horizon Report: Higher Education Edition*. This paper argues that most of the universities address the majority of the themes, with the most variation occurring in regard to whether or not universities are unbundling, micro-credentialing and applying artificial intelligence and other app-like interfaces. Furthermore, universities are differentiating themselves in regard to whether their strategic plans extend beyond aspirational propositions to specific strategies and key performance indicators addressing challenges, approaches, outcomes and impact. The key contribution of this paper to the literature is a *Higher Education Governance Framework* with definitions, examples directly from universities' strategic plans and recommendations.

**Keywords:** strategic planning; higher education; disruptive changes

## Introduction and context

According to the *Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching* (n.d.) website, Australia has forty-one universities. Forty of these universities (Torrens University being the exception) provide open access to strategic plans on their websites. Many of the universities define strategic plans (and planning) within the documents. Federation University (2015), for example, defines a strategic plan as an expression "... of the University's purpose, values and principles" (p. i). Numerous universities describe their strategic plans as living documents that both reflect and shape choices, actions and responses. The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (2016) describes their strategic plan as the articulation of an inclusive and elaborate decision-making process, which USQ depicts as "the capstone of an ongoing planning process" (p. 2).

Just as universities define 'strategic planning' within these documents, many have also conceptualised their view on 'strategy' itself. The University of Melbourne (2015), for example, defines strategy as a "choice about where limited research investment is placed, how curriculum is organised and delivered and who beyond campus agrees to be a partner" (p. 8). As such, strategic plans become a compass, positioning what counts as metaphorical

magnetic north for that University. Strategic plans present universities' distinctive identities and unique value propositions. The University of Adelaide (2012) wrote, "more than ever a university with a clear identity and sense of purpose will flourish in changing times" (p. 6). There appears to be a common consensus across strategic plans that universities who present themselves as 'too vanilla' or in other words, without a unique profile or purpose, will cease to exist in the not too distant future.

Change is a dominant theme across all of the strategic plans. RMIT University (2015) wrote that it is incumbent upon universities to "... embrace the disruptive changes taking place around us" (p. i). While there was a wide range, four overall changes were most frequently addressed across strategic plans. Eight universities wrote that their plans were shaped, in-part, by recognition that universities are facing increasing financial uncertainty and specifically that there have been, and will continue to be, higher education funding cuts. Seven universities wrote about disruptive technologies and unprecedented access to information, including through the proliferation of social media. Seven universities wrote about an increasing need to assert relevance and to achieve high ranks on league tables. Following-on from this theme, five of the strategic plans noted heightened competition for student enrolments nationally and internationally.

Strategic plans from across Australian universities explicitly state that successful institutions not only accommodate and respond to change, but also play active roles in shaping that change. For example, University of Wollongong (2016) wrote,

Universities have never been more important to our future. In a world facing very large and complex social, environmental and economic challenges our universities will play a central role in keeping Australia economically competitive and socially cohesive. The higher education sector will be at the forefront of shaping contemporary policies and a modern society (p. 2).

From this stance, strategic plans become vital as they not only assure the viability and sustainability of discrete universities but also, the protection and heightening of knowledge capital.

## **Literature Review**

An emergent theme in higher education literature is that contemporary universities are caught in a metaphorical tug-of-war between competing industry, government and non-government organisations (Bieler & McKenzie, 2017; James & Huisman, 2009; Sirat, 2010). In a study undertaken by James and Huisman (2009), there was a clear and identifiable congruence between the analysed institutional mission statements and government and industry policies, thus illustrating the extent to which institutional strategy documents are influenced by economic, political and cultural factors.

Research has confirmed that strategic documents serve a vital purpose in communicating the value propositions of institutions and enhancing their legitimacy with external stakeholders

(Morphew & Hartley, 2006). In this research, the authors analysed 299 (out of 1,160) randomly selected American Higher Education Institution (HEI) mission statements to determine their distinctive identities and query whether there were fundamental differences in their identities depending upon type / classification. Using textual analysis, the authors coded each of the mission statements. Across the mission statements, 118 distinct elements were identified. The results indicated striking similarity in the elements of public and private institutions. While such elements (e.g. service) were common across HEIs, deeper analysis revealed nuancing and wide variance in how such elements were actioned and measured. Furthermore, the roll-out of elements closely mapped to the missions of key strategic partners. Morphew and Hartley (2006) concluded that institutions “include in their mission what their benefactors value” (p. 467). The overall consequence is that external stakeholders are sceptical regarding the ‘truth’ and significance of mission statements.

Morphew and Hartley’s (2006) argument that external stakeholders influence the strategic documents of HEIs was congruent with the findings of research conducted by Efe and Ozer (2015). Efe and Ozer (2015) conducted a discourse analysis of the mission and vision statements of 105 state and 66 private HEIs in Turkey. The researchers sought to determine: the extent to which public and private institutions differed in their aims and values; how stakeholders were represented within these statements and; the key themes of Turkish educational policy. Six element clusters (Education, Values and Commitment, People, (Inter)nationality, Fields of knowledge / development / growth and Other) resulted. No evident differences in the elements across private and public HEIs were revealed. The researchers wrote, “all universities emulate and garner a variety of almost identical mission and vision statements” (p. 1120). The authors recommended that further research go beyond the mission and vision statements.

Despite substantial searching, only one published study was revealed that analysed full strategic plans. Bieler and McKenzie (2017) undertook a content analysis of 50 (out of a potential 220) Canadian HEI strategic plans to ascertain the degree to which sustainability is incorporated within the strategic visions of institutions. Results indicated that most of the analysed strategic plans did not prioritise or feature sustainability, listing it as one of many policy priorities. Whilst this study analysed a substantive sample size of strategic plans, the scope of the study was limited insofar as identifying the extent to which these HEIs embedded sustainability initiatives. There is thus an identifiable gap within the literature concerning the overall themes constituting HEI strategic plans.

## **Research questions and scope**

This brief review of the literature on strategic planning and associated documents in higher education reveals three apparent gaps:

1. Empirical analysis has not taken place in the context of Australian higher education.

2. There is a paucity of published literature that addresses strategic planning (as combining planning, mission and vision), with research being largely confined to only mission and/or vision statements.
3. Strategic plans have not been mapped against a list of educational trends.

In order to contribute to resolving these research gaps, this research was designed such that:

1. Empirical analysis includes data from 40 Australian universities.
2. The full strategic plans of these 40 universities were thematically analysed.
3. Educational trends (forecasted for the next 5 years) from the *2017 Horizon Report: Higher Education Edition* (Adams, Cummins, Davis, Freeman, Hall & Ananthanarayanan) were mapped against the strategic plans. Hereafter this source paper will be referred to as the *Horizon Report*.

The research questions that guided the analysis reported in this paper were:

1. What are the articulated trends across Australia's universities?
2. To what extent do university strategic plans articulate challenges, approaches, desired outcomes and explicit impact statements?
3. Do the trends in Australian higher education align with the trends identified in the *Horizon Report*?

The overall research question was – what are the common and unique learning and teaching goals and plans of Australia's universities.

## Methods and analysis

The overall method of this research project was manual thematic analysis. The *Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching* website (n.d.) was consulted, listing 41 Australian universities. The websites of each of these universities was searched to locate strategic plans or equivalent. All but Torrens University Australia included strategic plans on their websites. The analysis therefore included the 40 available strategic plans. Two copies of each of 40 strategic plans were printed.

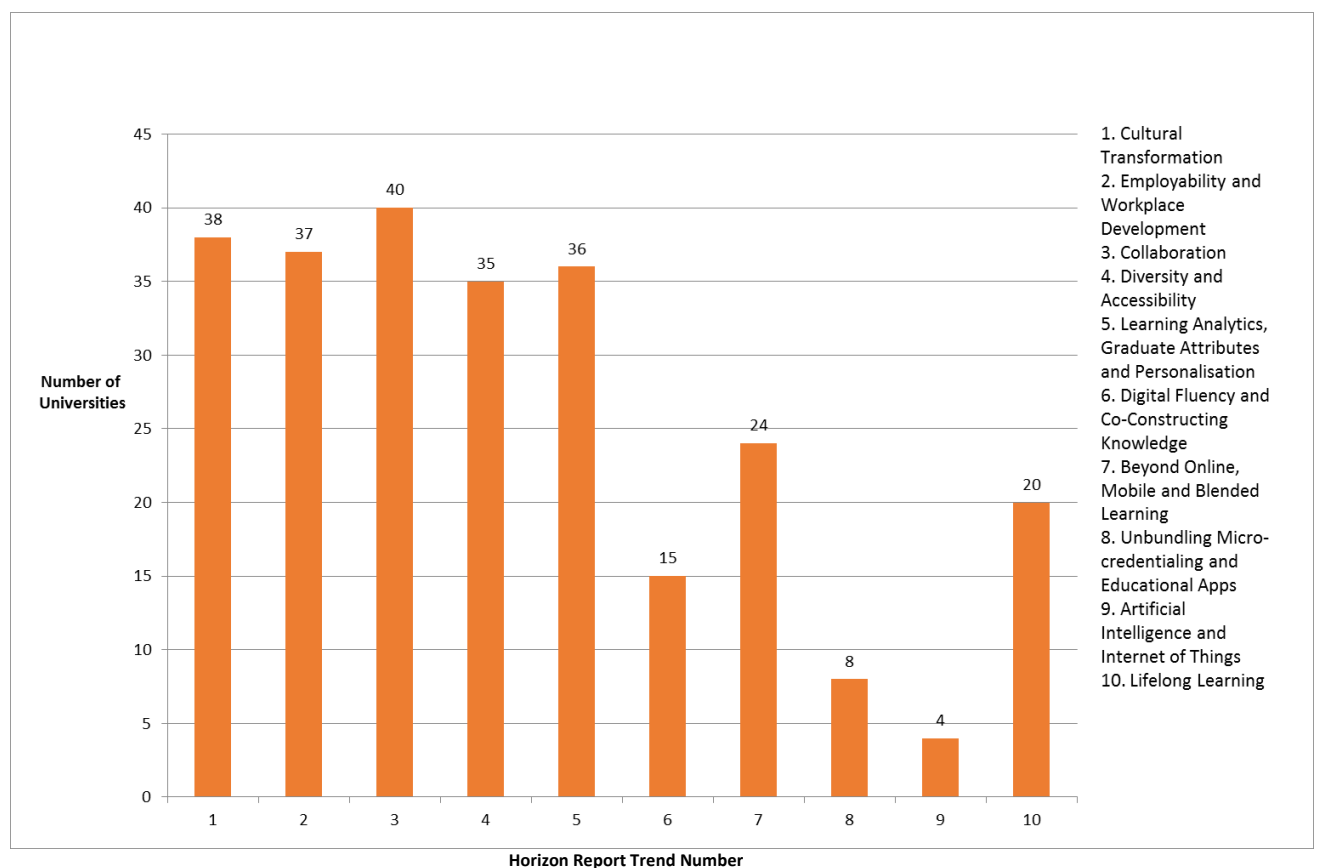
The *Horizon Report* list of ten overall educational change trends informed the thematic analysis. The ten identifiable trends outlined within the *Horizon Report* are detailed in the Results section below.

The authors created tables for each of Australia's eight states and territories. The universities were listed on the X axis (choosing a state for those universities such as Australian Catholic University who's locations span across states and do not have a 'main' campus) and the keyword titles of the ten *Horizon Report* trends on the Y axis. The two authors separately read

the 40 strategic plans. While reading, they highlighted (with coloured highlighting texters) sections that explicitly articulated the ten *Horizon Report* trends and wrote the identifying trend number and code beside. The authors placed tick-marks in the fields where each of the strategic plans addressed each of the trends. After completing all 40 strategic plans independently, the two co-authors compared and contrasted tick-marks. There was minimal variance (6 fields across the 40 strategic plans) where the authors' analyses contrasted. The variances were discussed and a keyword search for each of these strategic plans conducted to derive a defensible coding. In addition to highlighting *Horizon Report* trends, the authors also highlighted, flagged and wrote codes beside notable quotes and stand-out strategic actions, measurable outcome statements and explicit depictions of impact.

## Results

This section of the paper lists, describes and provides specific examples from the universities' strategic plans for each of the ten trends presented in the *Horizon Report*. Figure One displays how many universities explicitly articulated each trend within their strategic plans.



**Figure 1: Higher Education Trends across Australian Universities**

In the text below, the trends are listed in the same order as the *Horizon Report*, rather than by thematic frequency.

#### **Trend 1: Cultural Transformation n = 38**

While universities have a long history of explicitly stating key research domains as well as goals to increase research output and dissemination, an emerging trend is to clearly state an emphasis on teaching and learning, with a focus on student experience. The University of New South Wales (2015) is achieving this through supporting academic staff who are providing exceptional and rich educational experiences for their students. Staff are supported by Instructional Designers, Educational Technology Support Officers and digital platforms.

#### **Trend 2: Employability and Workplace Development n = 37**

Universities are increasingly acknowledging that students' primary motivation for enrolling in degrees is for career credentialing and preparation. A trend is therefore to articulate strategies for ensuring that students gain 'real-world' skills. The University of Adelaide (2012) has developed a Graduate Career Readiness Program which provides "tailored work experience and career mentoring in the workplace" (p. 10).

#### **Trend 3: Collaboration n = 40**

There is increasing recognition of the 'village' concept in education. Approaches to connection, cooperation and partnership within and beyond the institution are therefore featuring in university strategy. At the University of South Australia (2013), an innovative staff buddy system was introduced in which all incoming students are matched with a staff buddy. These buddies help students "navigate our systems and provide additional pastoral care whenever needed" (p. 5).

#### **Trend 4: Diversity and Accessibility n = 35**

As university participation has expanded, so too has the diversity of students. The profile of university students includes a wide range of cultures, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, prior experiences and disabling conditions. It is incumbent upon universities to ensure an equitable experience where all educational resources (including online) are fully accessible and culturally respectful. At James Cook University (2017), the Diploma of Higher Education was introduced to provide an accessible pathway for diverse students and to provide students with the requisite skills necessary to succeed within higher education.

#### **Trend 5: Learning Analytics, Graduate Attributes and Personalisation n = 36**

As technological advancements have enabled detailed data about student engagement and achievement, and online assessment is increasingly able to adapt to the students' levels, there is an expectation that dashboards are used to empirically analyse learning and predict future performance, and that learning experiences are personalised. Furthermore, in addition to discipline-specific knowledge, skills and attributes, a trend is to assure and measure the development of transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving and critical thinking (i.e. graduate attributes). A cutting-edge approach to learning analytics was evidenced at The University of Sydney (2016) which "provide[s] feedback to teaching staff and students on gaps in engagement, understanding and skill, and drive adjustments in educational approaches to yield learning benefits for students" (p. 39).

#### **Trend 6: Digital Fluency and Co-constructing Knowledge n = 15**

There is increasing recognition that university has a leadership role to play in the integration and future-oriented digitisation of knowledge and overall functioning. Universities need to ensure that students use the latest technologies, learn to think, relate and function in information systems and digital knowledge economies and have the courage to innovate new ways of knowing and being. Central to this trend is the inclusion of students in the co-construction of resources, knowledge and processes. Murdoch University (2017) highlighted the importance of student co-construction with fostering a culture which enables and empowers students to “lead on learning and teaching innovations that will contribute to their success” (p. 8).

#### **Trend 7: Beyond Online, Mobile and Blended Learning n = 24**

Whereas online, mobile and blended learning used to be considered as innovative (as compared to classroom-based learning) these approaches are now commonplace. The trend in this area is to push the boundaries of these now common approaches to creative means of improving learning and to capture the evidence of learning advancement. At The University of Melbourne (2015), the flexibility of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have attracted in excess of 750,000 students per annum, with students receiving “verified certificates of completion” (p. 16).

#### **Trend 8: Unbundling, Micro-credentialing and Educational Apps n = 8**

Rather than expecting students to follow pre-ordained institutional systems and structures such as faculties, semesters, programs and timetabling, a trend is for universities to find ways for learners to study only the content they desire, in a time and place of their choosing, utilising user-friendly and often gamified apps and combining a variety of pay-as-you-go packages into eventual degrees. To achieve this, La Trobe University (2017) identified the goal of expanding their range of offerings, including single-subject enrolments, through utilising digital technologies to widen participation of diverse student cohorts.

#### **Trend 9: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things n = 4**

Computers are increasingly so enmeshed in life that we give little thought to them. Universities have been behind in this trend, but are now catching-up, through intuitive registration systems and their own university branded versions of Evernote. Deakin University (2017) provides an illustrative example of an award-winning initiative which includes “chatbots, AI, voice recognition and predictive analytics” to enhance the student experience (p. 17).

#### **Trend 10: Lifelong Learning n = 20**

Lifelong learning is another term that has been spoken of in higher education for some time. An emerging trend is for universities to articulate explicit strategy for making continued engagement attractive and amenable to students, alumni and staff. A key initiative introduced at University of Canberra (2017) provides “lifetime career assistance” for graduates, encompassing “access to professional development, discounted further studies, career services and professional affiliations” (p. 13).

## Discussion

This section of the paper provides responses to each of the three research questions, informed by querying the alignment with published empirical studies. This section then proceeds to draw-together responses to the three research questions to derive overall conclusions and recommendations.

### 1. What are the articulated trends across Australia's universities?

Ten forward-looking educational trends were described and illustrated in the *Results* section above. The mean and modal number of trends found in the strategic plans per Australian University were both six. Only two universities had clearly articulated all ten strategies and another two included nine. At the other end of the spectrum, five universities articulated four trends each. Notably, the frequency of trends could not be predicted, and did not appear to be related, to type of institution (e.g. research or regional) or by state. This contrasts with the findings of James and Huisman (2009) described in the *Literature Review*. These researchers found that the strategy documents that they analysed were heavily influenced by economic, political or cultural factors.

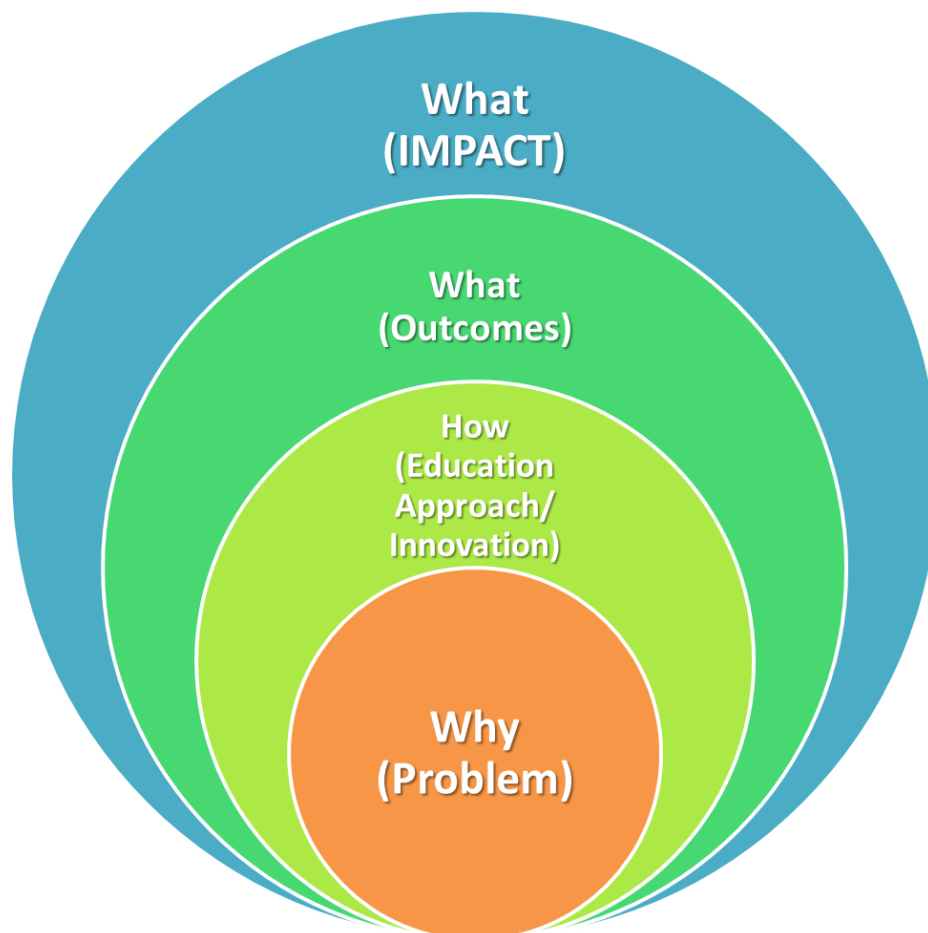
### 2. To what extent do university strategic plans articulate challenges, approaches, desired outcomes and explicit impact statements?

One of the overall findings of this research is that there is little distinctive difference between strategic plans in regard to aspiration. All of the strategic plans have noble statements about attracting high-calibre students, providing exemplar learning experiences, generating notable research and ranking highly nationally and internationally. In other words, if the branding was removed from the strategic plans, it would be difficult to match the documents to the universities, and strategic plans could be mostly swapped between institutions. Previous empirical studies had likewise revealed university strategy to be a metaphorical melting pot. For example, as described in the *Literature Review*, Efe and Ozer (2015) reported mostly identical mission and vision statements across universities. Furthermore, Bieler and McKenzie (2017) reported that policy priorities (e.g. sustainability) that might have created a stand-out value proposition lose their significance because they are counted-off in a long-list of other aspirations.

Where universities might differentiate themselves and therefore powerfully attract future students, staff and partners is in the strategic plan detail. Figure Two is a *Higher Education Governance Framework* that depicts the key elements, and the relationship between these elements, of university strategic plans that detail how aspirations can be enacted resulting in quality improvement. Some strategic plans clearly present challenges for particular cohorts of students relevant to their institutional context. This finding supports results of published empirical research. As described in the *Literature Review*, Mophew and Hartley (2006) found commonality across mission statements, but distinctive differences in the details of how the elements would be actioned and measured. These strategic plans then describe specific approaches to addressing and resolving these challenges. As articulated in The



University of Sydney’s (2016) strategic plan, moving to specifics “... has been the most difficult section in the development of our 2016 – 20 strategy in which to identify concrete actions for the realisation of our goals” (p. 44). This admission of the challenge inherent in identifying enabling strategies and action plans is empirically supported by the hours of scouring through plans it took to find these specific examples. At Deakin University (2017), a stand-out approach of “using proximity information, electronic screens recognise students and can provide personalised advice. As students move about campus Deakin Scout triggers support services based on their location” (p. 17). Some strategic plans then proceed to detail what outcomes had been achieved and/or how they would know when they had been successful through articulated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). While numerous universities used the word ‘impact’ liberally throughout their strategic plans, few supported the term by specifying what difference their educational model would make to students and graduates. Hicks (2016) defined ‘impact’ as “the effect that... outcomes have had on: 1) addressing significant national issues, 2) informing policy development and practice, 3) promoting and supporting change, 4) implementing innovation, 5) developing leadership capabilities. Ultimately this will include impact on any improvements to the student experience” (p. 18). An example of impact as detailed in the strategic plan of the Queensland University of Technology (2016) was to achieve a full-time employment rate of 80 per cent of graduates by 2019.



**Figure 2: Higher Education Governance Framework**

3. Do the trends in Australian higher education align with the trends identified in the *Horizon Report*?

Overall, the vast majority of Australian universities showed evidence of five of the *Horizon Report* (2017) trends in their strategic plans. In decreasing order of frequency, these were: Collaboration (all 40); Cultural Transformation (38); Employability and Workplace Development (37); Learning Analytics, Graduate Attributes and Personalisation (36); and Diversity and Accessibility (35). While these trends are therefore predominant in Australian higher education, the high tendency means that the trends are not differentiating, or in other words, the educational experiences underlying these trends would be experienced by most students enrolled in most Australian institutions. Universities who are differentiating themselves are doing so through strategic enactment of low-frequency trends. Only four Australian universities articulated strategic plans for implementation of Artificial Intelligence and Internet of Things, and eight universities detailed strategies for Unbundling, Micro-credentialing and rolling-out Educational Apps.

The overall research question addressed in this paper is – what are the common and unique learning and teaching goals and plans of Australia’s universities. What was revealed as common were an overall vision of education as a shared experience between stakeholders within and beyond the university, learning and teaching as high priority (equal to or greater than research), an obligation to assure graduate career outcomes, and a commitment to understanding and addressing student needs. What continues to be unique is technology-enhanced and digitally-enabled learning at the cutting-edge of innovation.

### **Recommendations for quality improvement**

In order to effect change through strategic plans, HEIs “must infuse the plan throughout the organisation” and foster a “strong stakeholder sense of investment and involvement” throughout the planning process (Sullivan & Richardson, 2011, p. 3). As part of the strategic planning process, a key initiative at RMIT University was the creation of the *Shape RMIT* website (RMIT University, n.d.), hosting information throughout the life-cycle of the plan (from inception, consultation, delivery and evaluation). This website provides a valuable platform in which to create “an open conversation to shape the University’s future” (p. 27). Transparent communication strategies such as the website mentioned above, have the potential to encourage an active and ongoing commitment by the university community and its partners to reflect upon and evaluate the success of the institution in achieving its initiatives set forth within the strategic plan. To further foster a “culture of strategic planning,” a valuable strategy is to ensure responsibility is dispersed as widely as possible throughout the centralised units and academic groups. This leads to the third recommendation for quality improvement – ensuring adequate and appropriate resourcing. Strategic plans, after all, must be achievable in light of adequate investment in staff capacity, capabilities or technology (Sullivan & Richardson, 2011). Furthermore, in an uncertain environment, institutions must remain agile and revise their goals and targets in line with contextual factors (Sullivan & Richardson, 2011). Finally, it is incumbent upon universities to do the hard work

of ensuring that goals are operationally defined so that they have traction. Strategic plans that propel future growth and development specify who, what, where, when, how and why.

## Conclusion

Australia higher education is on shaky ground. The Australian federal government closed the *Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT)*, leaving the higher education sector without dedicated representation or voice in government. Since the OLT was closed, there have been no more national: citations for outstanding contributions to student learning, teaching excellence awards, fellowships, and commissioned research on such important topics as graduate employability and student experience. Australian learning and teaching scholars are sadly forced to turn overseas to the United Kingdom's *Higher Education Academy* for leadership, acknowledgment and certification, because no such body exists in Australia.

Many of the 40 Australian universities, described in this paper, explicitly stated the rationale and function of strategic plans within these documents themselves. The overall message was that strategic plans serve to shape, reinforce and communicate each university's identity, thus guiding decision making, strategic focus and purposeful growth. A few universities shared a conceptualisation of strategic plans that is externally rather than internally focussed, explicitly arguing that universities (including through the strategic plan documents themselves) have a significant role to play in shaping contemporary local, state and national policies and leading a modern society. Herein lies the problem. This paper argues that the strategic plans of Australia's universities are not decisive and innovative. If Australia's universities are to be leaders in societal change, thus advancing and positioning our country at the forefront of global enterprise, then it is time for our universities to be bold, take a stand and each inspire distinctive curriculum and pedagogy and thus support progressive staff, students and graduates.

Through this research, the strategic plans of 40 Australian universities were analysed to identify 'what's hot and what's not' among higher education institutions. The main limitation of this research was that the strategic plans were taken at face value. In other words, there was no validation between espoused beliefs, vision and actual practice. A recommendation for future research is to compare strategic plans against enacted strategy by including site visits in the research method. Further research could also compare and contrast strategic plans of Australia's universities with those in different countries.

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