CHAPTER ONE

PLANNING FOR A SUSTAINABLE ACADEMIC FUTURE

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Keywords

sustainability; cross-organisational planning; student learning journey

Introduction

The range of contemporary national enquiries into higher education provides evidence that academic futures continue to change. In the USA, the Spellings Report (2006: ix) came to the "uneasy conclusion that the sector's past attainments have led our nation to unwarranted complacency about its future". Concerns included inequitable access to post-secondary education, and variable standards and outcomes including the low literacy skills of some graduates. In Australia, the Review of Higher Education Discussion Paper (2008: 1) focused on a sustainable role for higher education in a rapidly changing society:

> There will be new social and economic challenges, and new opportunities, arising from international transformations such as the rise of China and India, from social changes such as the ageing of the Australian population, and from environmental transformations such as climate change.

In the UK, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills has launched seven reviews of higher education for much the same reasons: "universities are integral to our national culture and a cohesive society. They create a broad community of learners willing to question conventional

wisdom and foster progress, while also nurturing the shared values that bind us together" (Denham 2008). Whatever the outcomes of these enquiries, it is certain that national systems of higher education will change and that individual higher education institutions will have to adjust accordingly. This chapter addresses the change processes in individual institutions and describes a sustainable planning process for critical adaptation in local higher education settings.

The imperatives associated with change arise, in part, from external pressures – what might be called the push factors: reduced funding, more students, increased competition, external quality audits and "Rapid developments in Communications and Information Technology (CIT) [that] have made possible modes and approaches to learning unthought-of thirty years ago" (Scott, Coates and Anderson 2008: 1). The academic future will also be influenced by "pull" factors including assumptions about what higher education institutions should be. In his treatise on the future role of universities, Barnett (2000: 1) concluded that they will be defined by the expected responsibilities of higher education yet he questioned whether we can any longer speak of "responsibility or a connected set of responsibilities with which the university might be identified?" He queried whether "the university any more has the space and the autonomy to deliver *any* set of goals". The boundaries of that space will, in part, be determined by national enquiries. However, others have argued that there are paramount responsibilities, especially to the environment. For example, Sterling (2004: 49) suggests that sustainability charts the way forward because it "implies a double learning challenge to higher education, concerning both 'paradigm' and 'provision'." The paradigm shift is towards holistic, systems thinking and cross-disciplinary knowledge. It is a shift to an ecological world view based on "participation, appreciation and self-organisation" (Sterling 2004: 50). The "provision" shift is about learning how to manage institutional change that will facilitate engagement, participation and holistic meaning-making. The "provision" shift is the focus of this chapter, which is based on a case-study of institutional change at one Australian university. It applies a sustainability framework and describes holistic planning that includes the interconnectivity of parts, cross-organisational goals and organisational reorientation.

Background

Difficulties for leaders in initiating change in academia were documented in an Australian report *Learning Leaders in Times of Change* (Scott,

Coates and Anderson 2008: 50), in which university managers variously described academic leadership as "Getting butterflies into formation" and "Trying to drive a nail into a wall of blanc-mange – little resistance but no result". In view of the difficulties, Barnett (2000: 75) asks, "Is it important, in managing our public institutions – such as universities – to ensure that decisions are made and that things get done or to find ways of encouraging the members of those institutions genuinely to engage with and to come to new understandings of each other?" In this chapter, the answer suggested is "Yes". The case study describes one approach which incorporates cross-organisational strategies for engagement and a holistic planning framework that supports students' learning journeys. This approach accords with the systems thinking advocated in the literature on sustainability: "Systems thinking addresses any problematic nexus ... by increasing the level of abstraction or overview, rather than the conventional reductionist route of examining detail and dividing the issues into smaller parts" (Sterling 2004: 50).

Sustainability is an elusive concept because it may refer to environmental issues, sustainable processes, or sustainable outcomes. Definitions of sustainability normally include reference to "the intersection of ... the economic, the environmental, and the social" (Bartlett and Chase 2004: 6), known as the triple bottom line – a concept made relevant to higher education by Appel and Kuipers (2004: 213), who noted that:

> To create a more ecologically sound, socially just and economically viable world, all sectors of society have to be aware of the specific challenges that sustainable development presents to them ... Whatever a person's [discipline] ... all professionals ... will be required to see, judge and act in accordance with ecological, social and economic dimensions, and criteria of sustainable development.

So what is the justification for engaging with planning processes based on engagement, participation and holistic meaning-making? Firstly, the participative engagement advocated in sustainability literature accords with expectations about academic life. Most agree that intellectual engagement is a key feature of higher education: "The Western university is based on conversation. No conversation, no university. It is as simple as that" (Barnett: 2000: 92). However, there is perceived antithesis between such collegial conversation and corporate planning for change in higher education. The "myopics", as Coady (2000: 10) refers to corporate university managers, who think that "The task of 'tertiary training' is to grind out 'graduates' at a certain rate for *consumption by society*". Boulton and Lucas (2008: 3) found middle ground in which universities are

understood as diverse institutions operating in short-term response to the needs of society and on the "long horizon" to new world views and practice:

> Indeed, whatever attention must necessarily be given to corporate effectiveness, universities are not enterprises with a defined product with standardised processes required for its cost-effective production. Universities generate a wide diversity of outputs. In research, they create new possibilities; in teaching, they shape new people. The two interact powerfully to generate capacities that are adapted to the needs of the times, embodying and creating the potential for progress through the ideas and the people that will both respond to and shape an as yet unknown future.

The very notion of progress is contestable because, as Coady (2000: 3) noted, it is not necessarily the case that "all change is reform and all novelties improvements". The purpose of this chapter is to argue that planning from a clear values base – sustainability – may lead to genuine reform. Sustainability planning blends corporate and visionary ideals and holds the promise of viable university organisations as well as graduates prepared for a world of work in which decision-making about sustainability will be a requirement because:

> Two things are certain. First ... we have never before had an environmental challenge on such an immense scale as to force modern society to remake itself ... Second, addressing this problem ... will require new thinking ... That is where higher education comes in. It plays important roles by both being part of a changing world and also actively shaping the future direction of that world. (National Wildlife Federation 2008: 2)

Despite the apparent importance of sustainability, the National Wildlife Federation's report on sustainability in higher education (2008: 2) noted no significant gains in the "curricular and academic dimensions of sustainability" in the five years leading to 2008. Similarly, the survey by Bekessy *et al.* (2002: 1) of Australian universities indicated that sustainability is far from mainstream in higher education organisational structures and processes. The argument here is that curricular, academic and organisational dimensions are intertwined. The question, therefore is, how can higher education institutions create the structures that will foster new thinking? "Is each university so structured as to engender the largest possible discursive creativity? ... Are there opportunities for spontaneous and fruitful cross-linkages across the discourses represented by the university?" Barnett (2000: 104). Such critiques of traditional university

structures are not new; for example, more than a decade ago Barr and Tagg (1995) noted that pedagogy and organisation are inextricably intertwined. Speaking of the shift in pedagogy from a focus on teaching to one on learning, they indicated that new pedagogies must be supported by holistic, organisational change because piecemeal changes are distorted by dominant paradigms. Otherwise, "The college interacts with students only in discrete, isolated environments [and] 'college education' is [merely] the sum of the student's experiences of a series of discrete, largely unrelated … classes" (Barr and Tagg 1995: 7).

There is considerable agreement about what needs to be done to lead holistic change. Burnes' (2004) model of organisational change included the need to develop: vision; participative strategies; the right culture and conditions of change; and implementation plans. In the public health arena the Ottawa Charter (1986) advocated the creation of supportive environments, policy development; community action; the reorientation of organisations; and the development of personal skills. It is an approach that has much in common with learning organisations (Tagg: 2003) because it is holistic and recognizes the need for structural and cultural reorientation for change to be effective. The characteristics shared by these models is that they are multidimensional, systematic approaches designed to produce change-capable cultures, which are found, according to Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008: 138), in evidence-based, outcomes focused organisations that have consultative decision-making, disseminated responsibility and "Strong support for the triple bottom line – economic, social and sustainable outcomes".

Methodology

This chapter is based on a descriptive case study. The case study is not actually a data-gathering technique. Rather, it is "a methodological approach that incorporates a number of data-gathering measures" (Berg 2001: 225). Here, the descriptions of holistic change management processes at one Australian university are based on participant observation. The case study method is useful in describing processes because it provides for investigation of cross-institutional organisational change "within its real-life context" (Yin 1984: 23). Further, use of the descriptive case study accords with sustainability literature advocating holistic, systems thinking because: "valid knowledge and meaningful understanding comes from building up whole pictures of phenomenon, not by breaking them into parts" (Flood 2001: 133). This diverges from modernist reductionism and represents a shift from "objectivism towards

critical subjectivity, and from relativism to relationalism" (Sterling 2004: 51). This case study describes holistic planning rather than outcomes. Its purpose is pragmatic because it shares practice: "Case studies may provide ideas, suggestions, or imagery that might sensitize outsiders to issues they may have not considered, particularly with regard to the process of institutional change" (Wals, Walker and Blaze Corcoran 2004: 347). The aim is to engage with the transformative agenda of higher education by describing a holistic planning process for critical adaptation to local settings:

> The lessons to be learned from the case studies … will depend on the reader's own background …[moreover, it is] difficult to distil lessons that are relevant and worthwhile for all … It is important that institutional innovation benefits from well-documented experiences elsewhere, not by blind adoption but by critical adaptation. (Wals, Walker and Blaze Corcoran 2004: 347)

Findings

The case study outlines the evolution and renewal of quality and planning processes at one Australian university. It describes the holistic "student learning journey" planning framework and shows how it has influenced organisational reorientation. It provides a vision of an academic future in which traditional barriers between academic and administrative services and organisational silos are reoriented to the service of students. This challenges traditional notions of academic culture based on disciplines and faculties, and points to an academic future in which higher education institutions are change-capable.

The study is based is on a multi-campus, regional university in Australia that specialises in widening access to tertiary education through flexible learning opportunities for distance education students. The university has embraced the need for change, implicit in an educational environment that is highly competitive. Accordingly, in 2007, a major change management project was initiated. Corporate efficiency is a motivation. The aim is to enhance the flow of funds to the core business of teaching and research. The process of change is also values-driven and the university's strategic plan includes enhancing regional, national and global sustainability. Further, it plans to respond to students' needs, in particular through flexible services and flexible modes of learning. Such strategic directions give rise to quality assurance processes that monitor holistic change and align values, plans, policies, actions and resources. Consultation

with staff, customers, stakeholders and the community is required by the university's plans.

The concept of the student learning journey informs all planning. It is a relationships-based and holistic approach that focuses attention on the student as a whole person, as opposed to the student as the subject and object of a series of unrelated interactions with an organisational bureaucracy. The aim is to ensure connectedness between the responses provided by the university at different points in a student's journey. It is about getting the context right to support student learning. This is important because, to learn effectively, students want, "efficient and responsive administrative, IT, library and student support systems actively working together to support ... operation[s]" (Scott 2005: 13). It is an evidence-based approach because it reflects what students are telling their universities, which is that the total experience counts: "it is the *combination* of consistently capable staff, with appropriate learning designs and a support system that enables them to deliver what is intended that is critical" (Scott 2005: 65). The journey metaphor is helpful because it provides a framework for evaluating the performance of a university at every stage of students' contact with it, from pre-entry to alumni.

The first step in the holistic planning process was to reach consensus about the meaning of the student learning journey and what this approach might mean. This was a risky task because the process of definition tended to objectify what is, in fact, a *perspective* that should be brought to bear on all decision-making. Nonetheless, the process of definition served to clarify the concept in local terms. The definition had to be useful. It had to provide a framework of activity through which staff could cooperate to improve students' learning and their experience of university. This featured organisational reorientation to functions associated with key milestones in students' learning journeys (enrolment, orientation, learning, graduating, re-engaging) and checklists that itemise tasks to be performed at each stage of the learning journey.

It was necessary to define the purpose of charting the student learning journey, because the aim is not to provide customer service in the sense of offering students what they want. Rather, the purpose is to establish a clear picture of how to create the most effective connection between students' lives and what it might be like to learn at a university. In brief, the aim is to plan a flexible response rather than a "one size fits all" corporate strategy. This involves flexible administrative procedures such as admissions and timetabling, and flexibility in relation to learning materials, assessment and delivery modes for all students. In this way, students studying under different circumstances may participate in

learning opportunities suited to their circumstances. A key strategy in this approach is to make available a variety of learning options, including a core resource package, to all students, whatever their mode of study. It also aims to provide sustainable business outcomes for the university, such as enrolling and retaining sufficient students to ensure the viability of the university.

The articulation of the student learning journey had implications for organisational culture and structures. Senior leaders now have cross-institutional responsibility focused on cross-enterprise processes such as learning and teaching, research, and enterprise. Each process is divided into sub-processes with responsibilities allocated according to organisational structures such as faculties and administrative divisions. Sub-processes are customary university functions. They include matters such as enrolment, orientation, design and delivery of learning materials, processing of grades, planning learning spaces, and evaluation of teaching. The key point, however, is that there is a driver of each cross-institutional process. Without this, focus would be lost and quality improvement so disseminated as to be ineffective.

High level implementation of quality processes is managed by senior staff with whole-of-organisation responsibility. This horizontal management structure is designed to cut across organisational silos in order to achieve coherent outcomes for students. Organisational sections draw from the cross-organisational goals plans to produce five-year plans for each section, which include annual alignment of requirements with budgets. These planning processes influence annual priorities for staff, which are determined through performance review. In this way, annual priorities are designed to flow through the line management system to facilitate the development of a change-capable culture.

The student learning journey framework is outcomes-focused. It moves beyond performance measurement of tasks to an analysis of how the outcomes of tasks link in support of students' learning and students' experiences of university. The framework has informed the reorganisation of student management to a student-centred perspective. The important change is that student management is now organised along functional lines with holistic overview and quality assurance of different types of student experiences: on-campus, distance education or studying with institutional partners.

Much of the planning described so far might be described as "business-as-usual" planning – just revising everyday processes. It proved insufficient to address declining student numbers, non-viable budget forecasts, poor learning and teaching outcomes, limited growth in research

performance, and ageing infrastructure. As a consequence, the university initiated a whole-of-university change management project to give impetus to quality improvement through four projects encompassing Facilities; Academic Profile; Student Management, and Corporate Service. Clearly, the model integrates the academic and corporate dimensions of university life. The project is values-driven and aims to enhance the student learning journey, in particular through a renewed portfolio of programmes.

Outcomes so far include the reorganisation of corporate service and student management processes, the streamlining of the university's undergraduate programme profile, and the initiation of a major project to enhance the quality of degree programmes and to raise the standards of teaching. Other outcomes have included saving in annual expenditure, which now provides opportunities to rebuild the profile of teaching and research to suit contemporary demand, including responsiveness to the university's professed valuing of sustainability. To date, the university has a research centre focused on sustainability, a new sustainable business degree and one of the first Australian law schools to introduce a green initiative designed to contribute to enviro-legal research and the development of green law initiatives. The project has also given rise to enhanced career prospects for staff through the development of job families for professional (administrative) staff so that junior staff can see a promotional pathway. Revised committee structures and governance processes are designed to facilitate participative decision-making and a restructured facilities management now includes enhanced collaboration with academics to design learning spaces suited to contemporary needs, as well as an asset management focus on sustainable operations, including a draft environmental action plan. The link between sustainable organisation, research, teaching and environmental sustainability is already apparent in these early outcomes.

Discussion

What are the lessons to be drawn from this case study? The first is that there is unlikely to be sufficient focus or concerted effort to achieve sustainable outcomes if a higher education institution does not have tangible evidence of the "s" words (sustainability and students) in the highest level planning statements of the organisation. If there is no documented and agreed view that students are at the centre of both organisational and academic effort and, if there is not an agreed model that enables all elements of the organisation to understand and give effect to providing coherent outcomes for students, then efforts towards sustainable

outcomes are likely to be unsuccessful. The three key elements at the heart of understanding and achieving a successful outcome are organisational strategy, holistic planning and coordinated action. In this case, the organisational strategy included the cross-institutional structure of the university's planning and quality assurance processes and the whole-of-university change management project that incorporated academic and corporate dimensions. The second key element is a holistic planning framework, in this case the student learning journey. Thirdly, implementation is crucial. As Scott, Coates and Anderson noted (2008: vi), "Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas". High level statements, organisational strategies and planning frameworks are essential but insufficient to achieve sustainable outcomes. A necessary condition in achieving effective change is action in every section of the organisation.

Overall, the case study has demonstrated the importance of getting the context right, which means, for example, that support for students' learning moves beyond pedagogy and curriculum to include matters such as marketing, recruitment, enrolment, timetabling and graduation. The case study therefore shows how holistic planning and implementation crosses the increasingly weak, but traditional, boundaries between academic and administrative functions and traverses organisational sections of a university.

So what has organisational reorientation based on the student learning journey actually achieved? Does a student learning journey framework add value or is this merely "soft" quality assurance, which, from an academic perspective, still results in the rationalisation and centralisation so often seen as antithetical to devolved forms of organisation in academia? It is true that the principles of fairness and equity inherent in the student learning journey perspective imply the need for a framework of consistent processes, which may be seen as a form of standardisation that undermines academic freedoms. It is also true that the question, "What's in this for students?" shifts attention to students' rights and needs and away from individualistic academic self-determination. Coady (2000: 15) noted that, "good management cannot be an end in itself but takes what value it has from the non-management purposes it serves". It might, therefore, be concluded that the consultative communication, necessitated by process-driven change management in this case study, also lies at the heart of collegial academic culture. Even so, the student learning journey perspective might still be characterised as managerialist "customer-service revisited". But this conclusion would be too simple because, in part, the learning journey perspective arose in reaction to corporate university

business practices that characterise students as customers. The student learning journey perspective is service focused but not the same as customer service. It seeks to ensure appropriately consistent processes to support students, whilst acknowledging their diverse needs. It is a planning framework that aims to develop a student-centred organisation.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented, for critical appraisal, one approach to planning for higher education organisation. It is based on participative processes that will result in diverse, local outcomes, because, as Barnett (2000: 5) noted, there can be no one unifying story about the future of higher education. The strategies outlined represent the kinds of systems thinking evident in the literature on sustainability. They show that cross-institutional strategies mean that the parts are integrated across the whole system in support of students' learning journeys. It also describes the corporate and academic alignment required to support the core university business of learning, teaching and research. Such organisations will create the circumstances for active engagement in the development of academic futures because:

> The university becomes more than an aircraft carrier of multiple discourses; it becomes engaged in assisting novel juxtapositions of its discourses, and, in the process, in creating new forms of knowing. In this university, there can be no hiding place. (Barnett 2000: 105)

In conclusion, this case study of sustainability planning has shown the importance of working with cross-institutional frameworks that promise change-capable organisations. Without this, there is a risk that change initiatives in higher education will be little more than that implied by a "cannibal using a fork" – a metaphor used by Elkington (1999: 11) to describe the lack of real change.

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