

Concurrent Session H
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2.25pm – 3.15pm



Session 2

Contested Strategic Planning Landscapes: Reflections from the Professoriate and the Executive
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Tess Howes is an educational strategist and higher education manager with years of experience as a professional member of staff at three Australian universities.

Tess spent the last six years investigating leadership and strategic planning in the Australian university sector as part of a Doctor of Education program at Sydney University. She extended her sabbatical to present and publish the study findings, and establish a professional life history writing service as she is passionate about supporting historical self-expression through the writing and publication of individual life/family histories.

Tess has a range of research interests in leadership, strategic planning, strategy development, management, the history of the Australian university sector, particularly the impacts of the Dawkins Reforms, as well as turn of the century Australian feminist self-expression. She has excellent time management skills and managed to raise a large, boisterous family while working full-time and studying part-time for the last twenty years.

This paper will present one of the findings of a research study investigating leadership and strategic planning in Australian universities.

Australia's 39 universities are large educational organisations operating in a competitive, global environment. They are also complex, socio-political-educational institutions with many internal cultures and conflicts, compelled to continually adjust to Commonwealth Government funding cuts and new policy directives.

Strategic planning was introduced to Australian universities as part of the structural reforms implemented by the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, the Hon J S Dawkins MP in 1988. The 'Dawkins Reforms' dismantled the binary system of higher education establishing the Unified National System that is still in place today.

Strategic planning, performance management and review were emphasized by Dawkins as appropriate management mechanisms to deliver efficiencies and increase institutional performance in areas of national importance. However, while Dawkins stated that the specific details of the strategic planning process was a "matter for institutions to decide and implement", a comprehensive list of the elements that a strategic plan was expected to include was provided to ensure consistency throughout the sector (1987).

Maslen and Slattery (1994) conducted a review of the Australian university system five years after the Dawkins Reforms were enacted, concluding that Australian universities were deeply troubled institutions. Another Australian academic declared that the "university system has so many problems that it is no exaggeration to describe the situation as a crisis ..." (Lowe, 1994).

A comprehensive alternate view is offered by Professor Coaldrake, Vice-Chancellor of QUT, and Dr Stedman (2013). The Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University, Dr Spence, summarises the situation as follows: "...There are two stereotypes of Australian vice-chancellor, the managerial bastard and the academic's academic ..." (2012). A former Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, Sir Colin Lucas,

declared that the “future lies in ‘very smart planning, highly skilled choice making and determining a single focus” (cited Bosetti, Walker, 2010).

However, as the participants in this study reveal, there is a wide range of opinion concerning what constitutes good strategic planning and effective strategic leadership in Australian universities.

Strategy is about establishing priorities; it is about making decisions, often very difficult decisions. Therefore, Australian university executives must frequently take actions that will be unpopular with parts of their constituency, placing them in a challenging leadership position. One of the key tasks for individuals leading strategic planning is to establish a shared vision to guide the planning process that is aligned to the core values of the organisation. If the core organisational values are not shared by all the stakeholders, for example, in the case of universities, the professoriate and the university executive are not thinking or planning as one, then it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to develop a shared vision and conduct an effective strategic planning process.

The study findings demonstrate that as strategic planning was implemented in Australian universities in the post-Dawkins era, institutional leadership was gradually but progressively wrested from the professoriate, and in its place, strong, central, authoritative leadership held by Vice-Chancellors and their senior executive was installed.

The collection of case studies reveal that the participants with executive leadership responsibility reflect positively on their strategic leadership and planning experiences, while the other study participants, all members of the professoriate, are more critical. The data are presented in three clusters: the Participant Observers, who were not actively engaged in strategic planning at the executive level for different reasons; the Academic Leaders, who were actively engaged in strategic planning at their respective universities at the second tier executive level; and the Vice-Chancellors, who held significant strategic planning and leadership responsibilities throughout their careers.

Some study participants were philosophically aligned with Dawkins’ strategic planning model and enthusiastically transformed their employer universities into modern, ‘entrepreneurial’ universities. Other participants developed a hybrid strategic planning model that encompassed both academic and managerial values. The participants who held the view that university leadership should be primarily academic and collegial, were forced to make a choice to become involved and try to shape the process so that it engaged the academic community, or stand aside and let the process unfold without their involvement or input.

The findings of this study suggest that university executives should engage the professoriate to review, revise and develop new ways of leading strategic planning that rely less on a centrally driven, directional, rational-technical approach that will excite and inspire academic communities throughout Australia.