

Educational Pathways in a Multi-sectorial Institution: Challenges and Strategies for the Future

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Introduction

The trend to develop several pathways for education, vocation and training by tertiary education institutions to meet the needs of the employment sector is growing, especially in the industrialised countries. In a high technology and information-based world, research-based vocational education and lifelong education are becoming increasingly important in providing value adding opportunities to the employment sector and they are growing in demand. This phenomenon is attributed to the growing need for a multi-skilled labour force or 'generalists' who possess good analytical and communication skills and, who are creative and innovative in meeting the challenges of the Information Age (Naisbitt and Aburdene, 1990). Australia, like other countries, is responding to this trend as indicated by the several recent government reports on the future direction of tertiary education, such as the *Foundations for the "Clever Country"*, *Young People's Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training*, and *Higher Education: The Challenges Ahead*. The overall thrusts of these documents were to improve access to and greater participation in quality tertiary education.

In line with recent government policies to provide greater access to and equity in the tertiary education sector and following the recommendations of the Finn Report, the Carmichael Report, the Deveson Task Force Options Papers and the Mayer Report which had identified the significant role of the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector in providing the vocational education and training needs for improving and maintaining the competitive edge of Australia's industries, many higher education institutions are strengthening their program articulation through credit transfer arrangements with TAFE. Equally, many higher education institutions treated these arrangements with disdain for they argued that they would lower the standards and quality of their programs.

Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of this paper is to examine the strategic amalgamation between two institutions in Melbourne: a higher education institution (Swinburne Institute of Technology) and a TAFE institution (Prahran College of TAFE or PCTAFE) which were reconstituted to form the Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) in July 1992. Several events occurring in the tertiary education sector provided the catalyst for the amalgamation. It is interesting though to note that PCTAFE senior management who had foreshadowed the implications of the restructuring of the higher education under the Dawkins agenda on the TAFE sector were already either discussing the prospects of amalgamation or establishing a centre of excellence for Furniture Studies. On what basis did PCTAFE senior management decide that an amalgamation with a higher education institution could assist them to achieve a better educational and managerial outcome than standing alone in this era of dynamic changes? How did Swinburne Institute of Technology become PCTAFE's chosen partner? What strategic plan was in place to facilitate the amalgamation of the two institutions? Did the amalgamation fulfil the objectives of PCTAFE senior management? These questions which constitute the objectives of the paper, and which have implications on futures scanning of the tertiary education sector, will be addressed.

Challenges In the Tertiary Education Sector

There are several environmental factors which challenged PCTAFE senior management to review its position strategically in the light of the changes in the tertiary education sector. These factors, which are influenced by the complex inter-relationships of political, economic, social and technological constraints, comprise the following:

The Dawkins reforms

The Dawkins reform agenda, as contained in the 1989 document entitled *Higher Education — a policy statement*, triggered off a spate of institutional restructuring in the Australian higher education sector. Catchwords or phrases like economies of scale, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, performance, quality of education, articulation, pathways, equity and access, and so on became the daily mantras of the sector. *The relative funding model is used to allocate financial resources based on the teaching and research profiles of the institution.*

National Training Reports

The four reports on national training needs mentioned earlier have emphasised the need for TAFE institutions to play a greater role in vocational education and training and that their programs should be articulated with the higher education sector. By implication, the four reports seemed to suggest a restructuring of the TAFE sector so that the sectoral institutions can provide opportunities for multi-entry and multi-exit (MEME) academic, vocational and training pathways for all with the relevant entry qualifications.

Economic issues

The current economic downturn and the declining public sector spending in Australia also affected the funding of TAFE. Like in the higher education sector, the funding of TAFE in terms of capital and recurrent funding is now based on the development of program profiles. The situation is further exacerbated by competition from the private training organisations who are now permitted to compete openly with TAFE programs.

As aptly put by Lockwood and Davies (1985, p.9), “in times of adversity and uncertainty the need to exercise foresight is increased since the pressure for external control and determination of programs increases under these conditions”. In the case of PCTAFE senior management, the adversity and uncertainty posed by the above factors seemed forbidding, and especially when there were indications that the State Training Board, its principal employer, was considering the restructuring of PCTAFE. PCTAFE senior management was aware that the college’s survival depends on meeting the local community needs.

Unfortunately, owing to the economic decline, businesses and industries in the Prahran municipality were either contracting, facing closure or had moved to other more prosperous areas. To some extent, this has effected a contraction in the provision of commercial and customised training courses as well as the relatively lucrative consultancies in the Business Studies area. However, this was counter-balanced by an increase in enrolment in the community and social services area.

The situation was exacerbated by the fact that there were strategic restrictions on PCTAFE itself to act unilaterally since it was governed by the State Training Board (STB) both legislatively and administratively. Its operations were confined by the STB to prescribed geographical areas, levels of programs and disciplinary fields. It was only in 1990, through the Victorian Education and Training Act, that TAFE colleges have been provided a legal basis to be self governing bodies and are protected from interference in internal matters such as its need to develop comprehensive and long term planning to cater for the changing nature of education and training in the 1990s. Hence it was not surprising that no strategic plan has been developed to cope with the sudden changes in the education and training environment. Nor was there any environmental scanning to collect and analyse data on the dynamics of

the situation. Under such circumstances, it would be useful to look at the constraints which PCTAFE had faced in developing a strategic plan.

Constraints In Developing The Strategic Plan

In trying to develop a strategic management plan, PCTAFE senior management have recognised the following problems:

Lack of time and data

Owing to heavy teaching and administrative commitments, members of senior management have found it difficult to have the time to develop a comprehensive strategic plan. In the absence of a decision support system for scanning the dynamics of the environment, PCTAFE senior management felt futile in not being able to possess the baseline data like demographic, socio-economic, and mobility patterns to establish a plan for responding rapidly to the changes occurring in the tertiary education sector. Furthermore, there were limited funds to support time release for staff to participate fully in the development of the plan.

Ambiguities in institutional goals

There were ambiguities in the institutional goals which were often multiple and contradictory, such as the access and equity goals where the disadvantaged students have no access into buildings. Furthermore, the funding arrangements between the STB and TAFE colleges normally encourage short-term budgeting and with the STB specifying funding priorities which may not coincide with those of the institution.

Central control

Owing to central control by the STB until the end of 1990, much of the institutional data collected were used to provide a feedback to STB to account for the monthly expenditure allocated to the institution by STB on a yearly basis. Information concerning the external environment was absent. Yet, there was tremendous pressure from the STB for PCTAFE senior management to indicate their future direction for the College, otherwise the STB would take the initiative to hasten the process of restructuring.

Management style

The management style of PCTAFE senior management was based on the values of team work and open communication. In the development of a strategic plan, they would have liked all staff concerned to have a shared vision of the future direction of the College. As such, ideally the strategic plan should be developed in-house by all members of the College where open and frank discussions are to be advocated. However, events developed so rapidly in the tertiary education sector in the years 1990-91 that what had been regarded as proactive thinking on the part of PCTAFE senior management were soon translated into reactive actions at best or inactions at worse.

Given the above constraints, PCTAFE senior management decided to employ a person or persons to assist in the development of their strategic plan. The brief was to undertake initiatives directed by the senior management for purposes of developing a strategic plan within a time frame of six months. These initiatives included a literature review of the current restructuring of the tertiary education sector and its implications on TAFE colleges, informal discussions with staff and students about their visions of the future direction of the college, development of a comprehensive questionnaire on the growth, academic and equity profiles, amalgamation issues and prospects, marketing plan, and resource profile of the college, and the conduct of brainstorming sessions with senior management using SWOT analysis.

The strategic planning process was implemented mid-way when the STB compelled PCTAFE senior management to negotiate with Swinburne Limited for full institutional amalgamation. Before the resource profile of PCTAFE could be strategically examined, the college had already signed an agreement for amalgamation with Swinburne in December 1991. Never the less, the initiative to develop a strategic plan, though incomplete, had greatly assisted PCTAFE senior management in their amalgamation negotiations and subsequently fulfilled their objectives of jointly establishing a multi-sectoral institution with

Swinburne which was later to be reconstituted into a university of technology with multi-entry and multi-exit (MEME) points built into their education and training programs.

PCTAFE senior management had chosen to amalgamate with Swinburne on the basis of the analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) confronting the college. An elaboration of the outcomes of the SWOT analysis would assist in understanding better the background to the establishment of a MEME university.

Outcomes Of the SWOT Analysis

The internal strengths of PCTAFE were identified as follows:

- Decentralisation of administration by centres which are managed by forward looking, proactive, dedicated and competent staff.
- Reputation in a number of program areas which include childcare, show business, records management and insurance.
- Strong links with relevant industries and employer groups have been established and these groups have often used the consultancy services of PCTAFE.
- Well serviced by public transport with easy access to central metropolitan facilities.
- Staff have the will and capacity to fulfil College mission and the expectations of the community, STB and College Council.

The internal weaknesses were identified as follows:

- Lack of corporatism.
- Historically the college had been proportionally underfunded, creating a weak college-wide organisation and this contributed to a lack of strategic planning, policy statements and decision making. For example, there was no coherent system to monitor unmet demand owing to a poorly resourced administrative infrastructure.
- College Council had too many distractions to focus on the tasks of achieving the College mission and the promotion of its interests.
- Staff morale was relatively low owing to the lack of funding. There was inadequate staffing and resources, lack of accessible and adequate accommodation, and poor quality and dilapidated facilities. This was compounded by the feeling of an uncertain future in the event of amalgamation with another institution.
- There was limited physical space for future growth.

The external opportunities were identified as follows:

- Amalgamation with Swinburne to form a multi-sectoral institution would enhance the competitiveness of PCTAFE in the FFS and overseas students market place.
- Good prospects for increasing the recruitment of full fee-paying students (FFS) and overseas students, which would help to provide more places for disadvantaged and disabled people.
- Legislation to integrate further education into the TAFE system.

- Changing political climate, with implications on urban renewal, revamping public transportation, and technological innovations, would provide opportunities in course design and development in those areas.
- Restructuring of workplace and advancing technology would contribute to innovations in curriculum development, course delivery, training and creation of a skills supermarket in which PCTAFE is well-placed to tap.
- Potential funding for disadvantaged groups (example, for aboriginal students).

The external threats were identified as follows:

- The fear of being 'swallowed' by a larger institution through amalgamation.
- Most institutions, especially the larger ones, were positioning themselves to dominate the educational market place while the smaller players, owing to lack of resources, could only wait to be swallowed up by the former.
- Fierce competition from private providers offering competitive prices for training programs.
- Establishment of industrial skills centres which compete with TAFE for students.
- Multitude of funding sources would lead to decreasing recurrent funding sources.
- Fear of change, such as change of government, constantly changing policy (especially Social Justice Policy) and the reintroduction of student fees.
- Lack of information or bombardment of disinformation makes strategic planning the more difficult.

In view of the above SWOT analysis, PCTAFE staff and senior management were of the opinion that, in order to strengthen PCTAFE's organisational and academic structures, an amalgamation with a multi-sectoral higher education institution with a complementary mission and profile would be an inevitable course of action. Many staff believed that such an amalgamation would improve their present working conditions and status, provide greater flexibility and diversity in teaching opportunities as well as their career development. Through the amalgamation, they also wanted to realise the establishment of a MEME institution where full articulation of the education and training programs offered is provided at all levels.

Strategic Profile Of a MEME Institution

PCTAFE fully merged with Swinburne on 1 January 1992 and both institutions were reconstituted on 1 July 1992 to form Swinburne University of Technology (SUT). At the Same time, a strategic planning exercise was implemented to review the structural and procedural processes that are appropriate to a university of technology. The exercise was expected to be completed by the end of this year.

SUT was reconstituted as a mature multi-sector educational and training institution consisting of four faculties, one school and a college of technical and further education. The institution offers education and training in technologies, business, the social sciences and the related humanities to Australian and overseas students. The SUT's stated mission is "to provide a continuum of educational opportunities from initial vocational education and training to postgraduate masters and doctoral degrees and to support the community through research, consultancy and continuing education" (SUT internal circular, May 1992). The mission is to be achieved through the maintenance and enhancement of teaching and research inputs, processes and outcomes so that SUT students are equipped with a depth of education, a breadth of vision and the qualities needed to contribute to the development of a prosperous, equitable and just society.

The strategic profile of SUT is distinguished by the following key features:

- a multi-sectoral structure, comprising both higher education and TAFE;
- emphasis on curriculum integration and enhanced articulation from apprenticeships to doctorates so as to facilitate flexible and cumulative, life-long learning;
- applied emphasis of educational programs at all levels, with strong interactive links being maintained and developed with the private sector for training, education, research and development;
- emphasis on applied and entrepreneurial activities to attract resources and share facilities and staff with a wide range of public and private sector clients; and
- operation of a multi-modal learning and flexible delivery system through the use of communication and computer technologies to make courses more accessible and cost effective.

The above key features of SUT have been regarded by its senior management as essential ingredients of a university of the twenty-first century. How these features operate within the MEME institution are best illustrated by SUT's pathways strategies and its multi-modal learning system.

Pathways Strategies

The following strategic priorities have been identified for the development of an effective TAFE-Higher Education pathways program at SUT:

- enhanced credit transfer and articulation arrangements between TAFE and higher education;
- development of independent learning systems including computer based learning initiatives, tutored video instructions and [other relevant instructional technologies] ...;
- provision of staff development programs based on agreed staff development plans and priorities to meet Swinburne's staffing needs over the next decade;
- enhancement of electronic communication between campuses and computer networking;
- implementation of an integrated management information system (SIT and College of TAFE, 1992, p.4)

These priorities are aimed at achieving full articulation based on the concept of integrated curriculum development which involves a collaborative approach to course planning, design and delivery for maximum course articulation, and the resultant transfer of credit across the sectors in both directions. The collaborative approach preserves the fundamental orientation of curricula in each sector. It also avoids compromising or distorting the needs of the other sector such as the achievement of recognised vocational outcomes for students studying in TAFE, and the attainment of appropriate academic standards for students studying in higher education.

The integration of curriculum of the two sectors is effected through the collaborative development of articulation enriched conversion units, which can be offered as alternatives to existing units through a student centred flexible delivery system. These conversion units have been designed to provide sufficient breadth and depth to meet the requirements for students to gain the maximum benefits of articulation.

This process, for example, will facilitate a 1:1 credit for 1.5 years in 3 year programs and 2 years in 4 year programs across a course range in all the academic units of SUT. Complementing and enhancing the pathways and articulation program is the development of a multi-modal learning network which facilitates the delivery of conversion units by means of a flexible, student driven delivery system. In the long run this delivery system will be cost effective as it will not tie up resources in the provision of ongoing, additional, mandatory classroom based delivery. The multi-modal learning network has available a variety of teaching/learning modes. There are basically four modes: domestic, local centre, sub-core and core modes, and they are characterised by the location in which learning occurs. For example in the

Domestic Mode, the student will learn at home using a variety of learning resources including print, audio, video and computer. In the Local Centre Mode, students will meet with small groups for tutorials, discussions or independent learning. In the Sub-Core Mode, students learn in traditional classroom situations and have access to library facilities, interactive media, learning centres, computer laboratories and student amenities. And in the Core Mode, students attend a fully developed campus which will provide traditional lectures, classes, tutorial and laboratory sessions as well as multimedia learning laboratories, computer laboratories and a full range of student amenities and services. Therefore, in a MEME institution as exemplified by SUT, there is flexibility and portability of learning where one can enter and exit at whatever level one chooses without the constraints of location, employment or academic qualifications.

Conclusion

This paper examines the strategic decision of a small TAFE college, PCTAFE, which was struggling for survival in the era of rapid changes in the tertiary education sector. The recently granted independence in 1991 by the STB to PCTAFE to manage its internal affairs and to develop a strategic plan for its future was cut short by both political and economic events which compelled PCTAFE to amalgamate with either its fellow TAFEs or a higher education institution. The strategic thinking of PCTAFE senior management then was to establish centres of excellence for Furniture Studies and Business Studies as well as to form links with a multi-sector higher education institution to diversify and to articulate its educational and training programs. The vision was to establish a MEME institution which provides flexibility and portability in education and training at all levels of the educational system. Hence, the staff of PCTAFE were amenable to the idea of full merger with a higher education institution which has a complementary mission and programs.

PCTAFE's vision was realised when it became fully merged with Swinburne in early 1992. By mid-1992, both institutions were reconstituted to form the Swinburne University of Technology which has a common mission to provide a continuum of educational opportunities from initial vocational education and training to postgraduate masters and doctoral degrees and to support the community it serves through research, consultancy and continuing education. Though PCTAFE senior management was unable to complete the strategic plan in time, their vision of a MEME institution was in place and they were able to share this vision with Swinburne which, incidentally, also have similar ideas. Hence there were no conflicts on both sides since they have a shared vision of a MEME institution.

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