Levels of Strategy in Public Higher Education

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There has been a perennial debate in the management literature over at least the last two decades regarding the similarities and differences between management in the business and public sectors. The debate is relevant to this study which is focused on public higher education. The arguments are of growing significance because of the tendency in some countries for government reforms of public higher education and public administration generally to be accompanied by attempts to encourage business management approaches such as strategic planning.

Many business management writers emphasise the generic characteristics of management and appear enthusiastic to promote the applicability of business techniques in other sectors.[2, 3, 4] Some argue that the traditional barriers between business and public sector organisations have been eroded, thereby facilitating the transfer of business management techniques. For example:

> *the boundaries between public, private, and non-profit sectors have been eroded... The blurring of these distinctions means we have moved to a world of interconnections and interdependencies, a world in which no one organisation or institution is fully in charge... This increased environmental uncertainty and ambiguity requires public and non-profit organisations (and communities) to think and act strategically as never before.*[5]

Yet despite the undoubted blurring of boundaries, other writers assert there are still major differences between the business and public sectors not just in degree, but qualitative differences.[6, 7, 8]

This paper will present the findings of case studies conducted in the United States by the writer who attempted to ascertain the relevance to public higher education of selected concepts of strategic management found in contemporary business literature. The term "higher education" has been used to cover three sectors of public post-secondary education in the United States, namely universities, state colleges and community colleges.

The following research question was addressed: How relevant are selected key concepts of strategic management from the business literature, in particular levels of strategy, to the governance and coordination of higher education?

Strategic Concepts

Strategic management has been defined simply as the process of making and implementing strategic decisions".[9] In contrast with earlier models of corporate or strategic planning, strategic management recognises as vital the links between planning and implementation. Strategic management has been

[2] R B Buchele, *The Management of Business and Public Organisations,* McGraw-Hill, New York, 1977.

[3] S W Edmunds, *Basics of Private and Public Management,* Heath, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1978.

[4] B Bozeman, *All Organisations Are Public: Bridging Public and Private Organisational Theories,* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1987.

[5] J M Bryson, *Strategic Planning for Public and Non-Profit Organisations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organisational Achievement,* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1988, p. 4.

[6] B Moore and G R Pratt, *Managing in Public,* Cassell, Sydney, 1980.

[7] B McCallum, *The Public Service Manager,* MacMillan, Sydney, 1986.

[8] L McGuire, "Models of Private and Public Sector Strategic Management" in G Davis, P Weller and C Lewis, *Corporate Management in Australian Government: Reconciling Accountability and Efficiency,* MacMillan, South Melbourne, 1989, pp. 27-28.

[9] C Bowman and D Asch, *Strategic Management,* MacMillan, London, 1987, p. 4.

presented as a broader concept than that of strategic planning, covering in addition strategy formulation, implementation and strategic control. Thus, strategic management extends the concepts of strategic planning by improving organisational capabilities for strategic thrusts, including an expectation of resistance as a basic assumption, and encouraging strategic thinking as a vital complement to the more mechanistic operations of situation analysis and evaluation of alternatives which are part of strategic planning.

Some business firms attempt to change strategic capabilities by developing appropriate integrated planning systems, planning processes and corporate value systems. Hence, strategic management has been described as:

development of corporate, managerial capabilities, organisational responsibilities and administrative systems which link strategic and operational decision making at all hierarchical levels and across all business and functional lines of authority in a firm.[10]

There is no shortage of alternative models of the strategic management process as applied to the business sector. Some models, however, do not provide adequately for the political pressures impacting on public sector organisations.

One integrated, environmental systems model which allows for these pressures appears as Figure 1:

Figure 1: Modified Strategic Management Model for Public Organisations
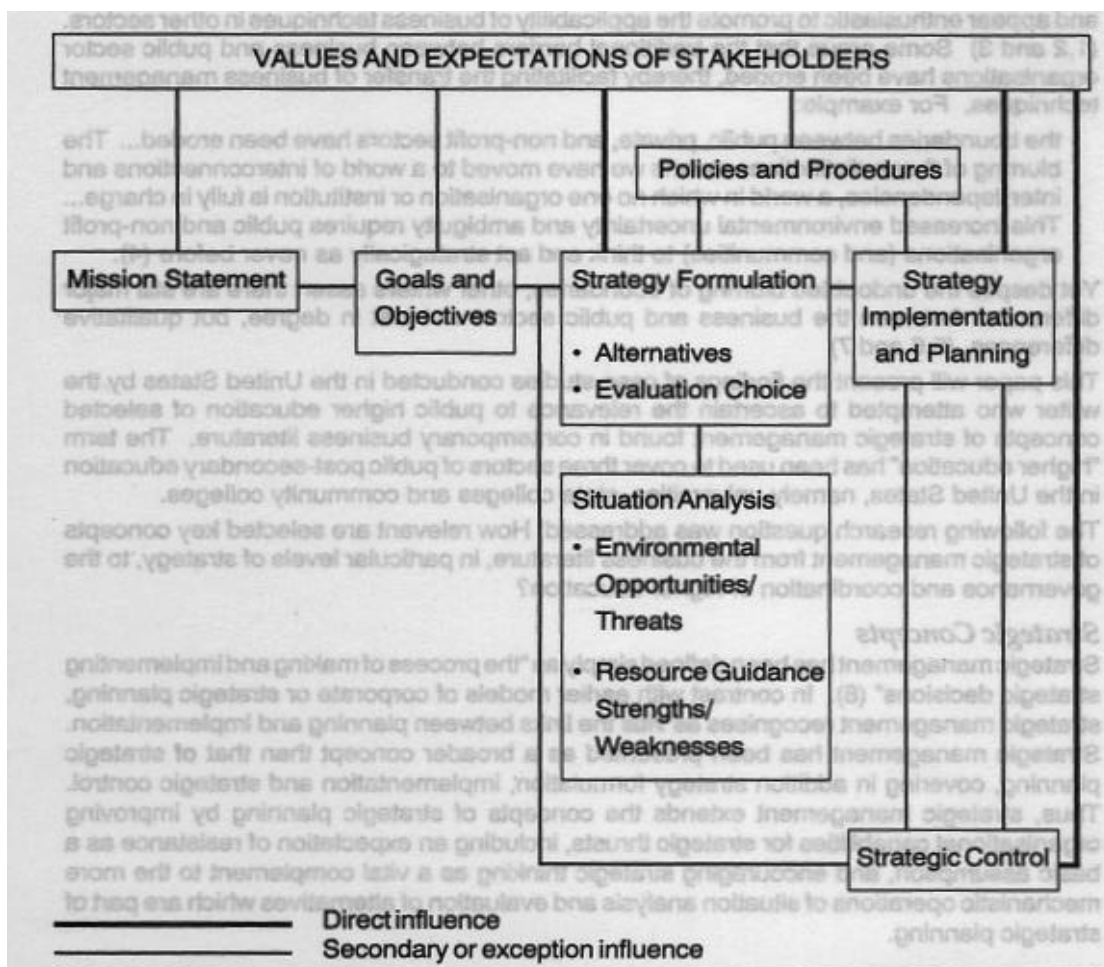
Source: Digman L A, *Strategic Management: Concepts, Decisions, Cases.* Homewood, Ill: BPI/lrwin, 1990, p. 373.

A major difference in this model of strategic management from that of some others presented in the literature is the over-arching influence, if not domination, of the values and expectations of stakeholders. This would seem to be a realistic reflection of the situation in Australian higher education over the past

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[10] A C Hax and NS Majluf, *Strategic Management: An Integrated Approach,* Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1984, p. 72.

five years, with external stakeholders in particular exerting influence over mission, goals, strategies, implementation and internal control mechanisms.

Levels of Strategic Management

The business literature identifies a number of different strategy levels for corporations. This paper will explore the relevance of such a classification to public higher education.

Societal or Enterprise Level

This level requires every business to focus on its mission, purpose and role in society. Guided by strategies at this level, business executives must decide issues, such as the sector in which the organisation should operate, whether it should be for-profit or not-for-profit, the form or ownership, and the composition of the board of directors. The societal strategy influences relationships with key stakeholders and the relevant external environment. Finally, societal level strategies should provide the corporation with a clear sense of purpose and thereby provide a framework for the development of lower level strategies. For the purposes of this study, societal level strategy was associated with the state-wide coordination of public higher education.

Corporate Level

Strategies at the corporate level focus upon the basic decisions regarding the businesses which should compromise the total corporation and the relationship that should exist between the major components. Thus, corporate level strategies seek to address questions such as:

- What set of businesses should the firm compete in?

- How do the businesses complement or reinforce one another?

- How are corporate level resources to be allocated to the various business units?

- Under what circumstances should decisions be taken on starting new ventures or divisions, diversifying and divesting?

In this study, corporate level strategy is associated with the system level of higher education.

Business Level

At this level, strategies are required to assist decision makers in areas such as how to compete in a product market or industry segment, and how to integrate the organisation's functional areas to achieve a competitive advantage. The aim of sustaining a competitive advantage over rival firms is fundamental at this level, with strategies concentrating on the competitive environment, distinctive competencies to be enhanced, and on niches to be sought. Three common categories of strategies in the business literature are:

- positioning strategies focus on where the central emphasis should be. In higher educational institutions this could include research, undergraduate studies or continuing education.

- strategies of differentiation aim to distinguish the business from competition to gain a competitive advantage. The differentiation factors for higher educational institutions could be, for example, image, quality courses or student services and support.

- strategies of scope take the perspective of the supplier rather than that of the customer. The aim is to gain an improved and/or changed definition of markets being pursued. For educational institutions this would include a mix between existing/new markets and existing/new programs and services.

Strategic Management in Higher Education

Following upon the apparent tangible benefits from strategic planning revealed in much of the business literature, some writers argue that there is a particular need for strategic planning approaches in higher education. 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.[11]

Due to the uncertainties of the final decade of the 20th Century, strategic approaches, to be really useful for higher education, should be able to provide insights on a range of possible future developments and how best to prepare for them, where to allocate the capital for attractive long term returns, what capabilities must be developed for competitive success, and how to design and organise the enterprise so the various activities contribute to each other and provide a basis for expecting superior results.[12]

Others may wish to debate the relevance of competitive strategies to public higher education. It will be noted, for instance, that strategies of positioning, differentiation and scope have as their objective an improvement in the organisation's competitive advantage. This listing suggests that an ability to manage competition will be an important factor influencing the success of higher educational institutions in the 1990's, particularly when traditional resource bases are contracting.

A university is a unique form of social organisation because of its catholicity of mission, its variety of roles and the many different functions it serves.[13] At least five major interests have been highlighted as being present in higher education systems - social justice, competence, academic freedom, autonomy versus accountability, and decentralisation versus centralisation.[14]

The essential features of a university have been identified as freedom to select:
- the types of activity in which to engage;
- the creation of key decision making bodies and their membership; and
- policy and style of operation.[15]

Another list identified the following special characteristics of universities compared with business corporations:
- flexibility for institutions, sub-units and individuals to secure their own independent funding (particularly research) to supplement their activities;
- the degree of independence of the tenured academic staff member; and
- the unique representative decision-making structure of universities where many, if not all, the main interest groups have membership on the main policy making bodies.[16]

This list of features appears to have been based to a large degree upon the concept of the traditional university in Britain, a model which has been subjected in Australia to considerable reshaping since the late 1980s.[17]

Often there is no clear agreement on the bottom line by the various stakeholders for universities to parallel the profit or return on investment figures which is so common in business organisations. In the absence of agreed goals and generally accepted indicators of performance, important strategic issues for public higher education are often the subject of conflict in the public, political arena.[18, 19] Given these differences,

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[11] G Lockwood, "Planning" in G Lockwood and J Davies (eds), *Universities: The Management Challenge,* NFER Nelson, Berkshire, United Kingdon, 1985, p. 169.

[12] M C Lauenstein, "The Failure of Strategic Planning", *The Journal of Business Strategy,* vol. 6, no. 4, Spring 1986, p. 77.

[13] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Universities under Scrutiny,* OECD, Paris, 1978, p. 14.

[14] G Rhoades, "Conflicting Interests in Higher Education", *American Journal of Education,* vol. 91, no. 3, May 1983, p. 283.

[15] R Thomas, "Corporate Strategic Planning in a University", *Long Range Planning,* vol. 13, October 1980, p. 71.

[16] *ibid,* p. 73.

[17] A T seagren, D C Trollope and G R Pratt, "New Directions for Australian Higher Education", a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for College and University Planning, Denver, Colorado, July 1989.

[18] B Moore and G R Pratt, *op cit,* pp. 78-79.

[19] McGuire, *op cit,* p. 2.

it is not surprising to find some writers have argued vehemently against transplanting management approaches and techniques from the business sector into higher education.

In Australia, where the Federal Government has adopted features of a business-derived managerialist approach to higher education reform, some reactions which have been particularly strong are:

■ the growth of corporate management techniques which result from pressure from the private sector rather than from needs perceived directly by higher education.

■ corporate management being based in ideology and not value-free. Hence, there are suggestions of a hidden agenda by Government and the corporate sector in advocating higher education reforms.

■ the reforms shift power from university bureaucracies to public officials in central government, hence changing the nature of the traditional, unique decision making structure of universities.

■ the new managerialism fails to encourage innovation and development of adaptive cultures which would appear to be vital for the 1990s.[20]

By contrast, there has been a number of writers who have argued strongly for the adoption and refinement, as needed, of management techniques which parallel those found in the business sector.[21] Chaffee[22] provided a case study of a rational planning model adopted for budget process at Stanford University, Keller[23] refined strategy concepts for application in academic environments which modified management techniques in the development of refined academic strategy and Cope[24] accumulated case evidence to support his advocacy of strategic planning.

In an interesting study Kelley and Shaw[25] compared approaches to strategic planning in academic institutions and manufacturing corporations in Australia. The study found the corporations had a greater tendency to specify quantitative and second level goals. The higher educational institutions had more outsiders on their governing bodies. Despite some differences, the findings of the survey did not justify rejecting strategic planning in academic institutions simply by claiming it as an inappropriate business management technique.

Research Methodology

A qualitative case study methodology was selected to study the relevance of the strategic management concepts I have already described, particularly regarding levels of management, to public higher education in a mid-western state in the United States. Five institutions were selected within the state on advice from an expert panel. Sixty nine interviews undertaken during 1989 covered not only executives from the five institutions, but also influential stakeholders from education system offices covering all institutions in that sector, central agencies of the state government, and committees associated with both the state legislature and the Governor's office.

The average interview time was one hour and twenty minutes. Data were also gathered by content analysis from a variety of documents produced by the institutions themselves, educational system offices, state government agencies and reports to the state legislature. Triangulation was completed by researcher observation, which usually involved a visit of several days to each institution and their relevant system

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[20] N Wood, "The Rise of Managerialism in Higher Education: A New Iron Cage?", a paper presented at the National Conference of The Australasian Institute of Tertiary Educational Administrators, Macquarie University, New South Wales, September 1988.

[21] R C Shirley, "Identifying Levels of Strategy for a College or University", *Long Range Planning,* vol. 16, no. 3, 1986, p. 92.

[22] E E Chaffee, *Rational Decision Making in Higher Education,* NCHEMS, Boulder, Colorado, 1983.

[23] G Keller, *Academic Strategy,* John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Ohio, 1983.

[24] R G Cope, *Opportunity from Strength: Strategic Planning Clarified with Case Examples,* ASHE-ERIC, Washjington, DC, 1988.

[25] N H Kelley and R N Shaw, "Strategic Planning by Academic Institutions: Following the Corporate Path?", *Higher Education,* vol. 16, 1987, pp. 319-336.

offices. Measures to enhance validity and reliability included member checks, peer review, statement of researcher bias, provision of audit trail and triangulation.

Organisational Context

The institutions studied were located in a politically conservative, agricultural state in the United States with a small population concentrated mainly in five urban centres. The public sector of the state's higher education provision consisted of six technical community colleges, coordinated loosely at a state-wide level by a voluntary association (TCCA); four state colleges with governance and coordination at a state-wide level by a Board of Trustees with membership appointed by the Governor; and a university system of three campuses, with governance and coordination at a state-wide level by a Board of Regents of elected membership.

A brief profile of each institution selected for this study is included as an appendix. The names have been changed to preserve anonymity of respondents.

Political Context

Several months prior to the interviews for this study, the state legislature had passed legislation requiring a major review of public higher education in the state, with particular reference to models of governance, methods of state-wide coordination and the preparation of a strategic plan. However, as a product of political pressures at institutional, parochial and state levels, the legislation had been amended to authorise the removal of the largest state college from the state college system and its merger with the university system in an apparent attempt to pre-empt the review. Furthermore, the constitutionality of the legislation was in doubt, and was at the time of this study the subject of challenge before the state's Supreme Court.

Thus, the period during which the study was undertaken was one of great volatility for the educational institutions, particularly for the university and to a lesser extent the state colleges.

Findings

The study provided useful findings regarding concepts of levels of strategy and their relevance to public higher education.

State-Wide Coordination (Societal) Level

When a parallel is drawn between business organisations and public higher education, societal level strategies would focus on the broad mission and purpose of higher education on a state-wide basis and define the roles of particular institutions. In addition, societal strategies should provide a sense of purpose for the system level. The findings of this study revealed.

a. A political and managerial dilemma was identified as there was a strong community demand upon the legislature to restrict unnecessary duplication between institutions. There was also a strong fear among some community leaders of creating a state-wide coordinating body or super board that might restrict institutional flexibility.

b. Role and mission legislation passed by the state legislature was the primary vehicle through which strategic issues of the purpose, mission and roles of higher education were addressed. The primary catalysts for initiating and modifying this legislation on the basis of data gathered appeared to be a combination of the need of the legislature to control expenditure and the need of the university to protect its turf. Turf protection was found to be a strong influence on the state-wide organisation of higher education.

c. No effective mechanism was discovered for attending to societal level strategic issues or on an on-going basis to administer the role and mission legislation. The Coordinating Commission for Post-Secondary Education was under-resourced and had been given little authority for such a role.

The Education Committee of the legislature did not have adequate data or time commitment from its members for the task. Additionally, that Committee, lacking authority and a clear sense of vision for higher education, had become an advocate for education to the extent, according to some opinions, of being captured by its clientele.

The most powerful formal group in the legislature, the Appropriations Committee undertook strategic decisions on a *de facto* basis, with its chairman playing the most influential role. However, several Appropriations Committee members identified a number of shortcomings in the process, including deficiencies in decision making procedures and the too frequent intrusion of political considerations.

d. The legislature as a whole had historically been either reluctant or unable to relinquish its role in strategic decision making for public higher education at the societal level. Yet such involvement as it did attempt was on a piecemeal and intermittent basis. This was due partly to the lack of administrative mechanisms, but also to legal constraints. Both the Board of Regents (University) and Board of Trustees (state colleges) had their composition and powers defined and protected by the state's constitution.

Thus, any sense of purpose for the system level was provided through role and mission legislation, other statutes on an ad hoc basis, and via the Appropriations Committee in conjunction with state funding.

System (Corporate) Level

There were found to be impediments to strategic decision making at system level in each of the three sectors, creating difficulties in drawing a parallel with corporate level strategic decisions, as suggested in the business literature. These impediments related to: local political support for institutions; conflicting stakeholder expectations upon system executives at the University; difficulties in excluding items from budgetary priorities due to the demands of internal institutional constituencies at the university; the intervention of the legislature to thwart a strategic decision to close a campus by the university; a philosophy of institutional autonomy, supported by a professional association in the state colleges; and inadequate legal authority and official recognition for the system body in the community colleges.

Strategic planning, at least in its more traditional, linear form, was not established at the system level. The TCCA and its colleges were exploring the need for further developments in this area. The Board of Trustees of the State Colleges had restricted its strategic planning mainly to the financial area, while the university had recently discontinued preparing formal five-year plans.

In this vacuum, role and mission legislation provided the strategic parameters for both authorising and prohibiting activities, and for specifying complementary relationships among the components of the systems. The state college sector felt disadvantaged by this legislation, which, for example, prohibited the offering of MBA courses.

Reference was made by executives at the system level in the state college and University sectors to competition between the two sectors. Turf protection was also a theme which was repeated in earlier interviews with individuals in state coordinating bodies.

Institutional (Business) Level

Sustaining competitive advantage is the focus at this level in the business literature on strategic management. Given the perception by many stakeholders outside the educational institutions that competitive turf protection was the driving force behind many institutional level strategies, the view of institutional executives regarding competition were relevant. In summary the findings were:

■ Urbania Community College's chief executive officer professed a strong commitment to cooperation rather than competition.

- Trinity Community College executives perceived their competition with private training colleges, particularly for in-house training contracts.

- Top Notch State College's chief executive officer was keenly aware of need to reestablish sustained competitiveness, mainly with the University.

- Competition with the University for undergraduate students forced Pioneer State College's chief executive officer to focus on enrolment growth to ensure institutional survival.

- The university did not acknowledge competition with other institutions in the state. Rather, competition was perceived with other institutions outside the state regarding students, staff and research funds in respect of the University's vision of becoming a leading research institution in the United States.

The strategies of positioning, differentiation and scope developed within each of the five institutions are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Institutional (Business) Level Strategies - Summary of Findings

Institution	Positioning	Differentiation	Scope
		Strategies	
Urbania C.C.	Emphasis upon growth areas of academic transfer programs for undergraduate courses and training contracts with employers. Also special programs for disadvantaged groups.	Emphasis upon responsiveness to individuals in time of social change (affirmative action) and to employers (fast track development of in-house training curricula).	New markets for existing contracts through affirmative action. New product (in-house training programs for potentially large new market [employers]).
Trinity C.C.	Emphasis upon training contracts with employers and off-campus adult continuing education	Emphasis on "tailor made" education (customised training programs for employers) and access (mostly open entry for geographically isolated students).	As for Urbania with customised in-house training programs. Continuing/adult education (expanding concept but small rural population).
Top Notch S.C.	New CEO shifted emphasis from academic excellence to (1) regional development and (2) student development.	Emphasis upon regional resource centre ("an energetic bright place", e.g. by hosting regional development conference).	Libbying legislators for new product (MBA) for new market. Expansion of market for mature-age, place-bound students in rural areas.
Pioneer S.C.	Emphasis upon regional economic development and increasing local access to higher education through basic education.	Strong emphasis upon student support and service: first generation tertiary student from farms (e.g. Grandparents' Day, Big Brother/ Sister programs).	As for Top Notch with place-bound students. Basic education to expand markets for existing programs.
University	Increasing emphasis upon research and postgraduate programs	Emphasis on state-wide mission, agricultural research and extension, doctoral research, and MBA.	Geographical market expansion for existing programs through new telecommunications technology. New markets for better qualified students.

Conclusion

The societal or enterprise strategy level from the business literature was compared with state-wide coordination of public higher education in this mid-western state. The parallels between business and public strategy were limited by the special legal, financial and political factors and numerous influential stakeholders involved in public higher education. The state had established comprehensive, detailed role and mission legislation to prescribe the role and activities of the various sectors and institutions of higher education. However, it had failed to establish effective, on-going mechanisms to administer the legislation. In this vacuum, the legislature's Appropriations Committee exercised partial and politicised influence which enabled institutions to engage in strategies often perceived to be motivated by turf protection. It is unlikely political activity will ever be far from strategy development at this level.

The corporate level strategies from the business literature were compared with the system level in the state's provision of public higher education. Here again, legal, financial and political factors limited the

parallels and constrained strategy development. The boards for the university and the state colleges had constitutional powers which could not be overridden by the state legislature. Hence, the business management concept of societal strategies providing parameters for corporate level strategies had limited applicability to public higher education.

The state legislature was able to maintain only intermittent, piecemeal control over system level activities. A state-wide review of the coordination of public higher education and the appropriate role of institutions occurred in a highly politicised context, which was not conducive to achieving a rational, comprehensive approach to strategy development.

At the system (corporate) level none of the three bodies with sectoral, or system-wide responsibilities had adopted formal, systematic approaches to strategic planning. This was due to:
- strategy formulation being constrained by role and mission legislation;
- strong political and social ties between institutions and their communities;
- conflicting expectations upon system executives;
- the need to satisfy internal constituencies;
- intervention by the legislature in relation to some strategic decisions;
- philosophy and expectations of institutional autonomy; and
- inadequate authority and recognition by the Legislature for the TCCA.

Concern to maintain competitive advantage and turf protection was perceived to be quite influential in strategy development at system level.

At the business level the business literature suggested that strategies would focus upon competitive position, differentiation and market scope. In fact, all five higher educational institutions studied had adopted strategies to position themselves better relative to their perceptions of changing environments. Similarly, differentiation strategies had been adopted by all institutions and were regarded as critically important. All five institutions were following strategies to increase scope either by developing new markets or new products, or by a combination of both.

In short, the concept of strategy level drawn from the business literature on strategic management was found to have only limited relevance for public higher education at the societal and corporate levels due primarily to political, legislative and financial constraints. Individual institutions however could find some of the business level concepts of strategic management applicable to improving competitive advantage, particularly with respect to strategies of positioning, differentiation and scope. Fundamental to this issue was whether institutional executives viewed other institutions as rivals and whether they sought to gain competitive advantage over them.

The finding that political factors exert significant influence in strategy development at the societal and system (corporate) levels enhances the validity of Digman's Modified Strategic Management Model for Public Organisations. It is probable, however, that the nature and scope of political activities varies according to the strategy level. This issue would be worth more detailed investigation.

Further research needs to be conducted in adapting these and other concepts of strategic management from the business literature to accommodate the peculiar political, legal and financial features of public higher education better. From an Australian perspective, comprehensive role and mission legislation as a state-wide coordinating measure, and local property taxes as a source of revenue for public higher educational institutions are novel features.

Appendix: Institutional Profiles

Note: Names of institutions have been changed to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

Urbania Community College was a "comprehensive, full-service public community college" established in 1974, financially supported by state funds together with local property taxes from its catchment area of four counties. Its three major campuses in urban areas and smaller teaching centres had an unduplicated headcount enrolment of roughly 30 000 distributed equally between credit and non-credit programs. The president had held his current position for 10 years.

Trinity Community College was a comprehensive two-year college which had also been formed in the early 1970's by merging three existing institutions, one of which had operated as a separate technical school since the late 1940s. The college's three major campuses served a city and surrounding rural communities and had a total headcount enrolment of 34000, some 11 000 of whom were enrolled in credit courses. Trinity College was financed similarly to Urbania College and served 15 neighbouring counties, covering some 10 000 square miles. The president had held his current position for 16 years.

Pioneer State College was a comprehensive, undergraduate, four-year college serving a rural region of eight counties. This was the smallest of the four state colleges, having a headcount enrolment of 1 600 with a full-time equivalent figure of approximately 1100. Unlike the community colleges, the state colleges and the University, it did not have access to local property taxes. The president had occupied his current position for seven years.

Top Notch College was a state-supported, comprehensive four-year college which served a rural region of 15 counties. It had an enrolment around double that of Pioneer College, with almost 40 per cent of its students being of mature age and attending on a part-time basis. The president had been appointed only 12 months prior to this study following a period of instability for several years in the position of chief executive.

The University was established in 1869 as the state's land-grant university. This formerly separate university had been merged with a municipal university in another city in 1968 to form the three campus university system. With an enrolment of approximately 24 000,4000 of whom were graduate students, it was the largest of the three campuses and regarded as the "flagship" campus, having a state-wide mission for research and doctoral studies. It was headed by a chancellor appointed eight years previously and who reported to the president of the whole university system. However, at the time of this study the Chancellor had been also appointed as Interim President following the board's controversial dismissal of the previous president who had held office for 12 years.

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