

Institutional Research's Role in Supporting Strategic Change: Experience at an Evolving Institution

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Abstract

Institutional research can be viewed as a process which provides an input of relevant information to assist institutional planning, policy making and decision making. Adopting this perspective, the paper examines the role of institutional research in supporting a planned process of strategic change to an institution's mission and profile of activities. It reviews the process of strategic change through which the University College of Central Queensland (UCCQ) is making the transition from a regional college of advanced education to a university. Particular attention is given to the dimension of consultation and participation, and its associated costs and benefits. A continuing focus throughout the paper concerns the role of institutional research in facilitating the planning process, with particular reference to how this was achieved at UCCQ.

Introduction

'Strategic change' affects the essential characteristics of an organisation's profile and activities, with the aim of improving its ability to operate successfully in a changing environment. Such change might be defined and promoted in terms of a diversity of rationales, desired outcomes, underlying values and ideals, but should ultimately contribute to improved success in relation to operating environment. Strategic change implies strategic planning.

Institutional research is best regarded as a process (Maassen, 1986) which involves:

- collecting data about performance;
- collecting data about the environment;
- analysing and interpreting the data;
- transforming these analyses into information to support institutional planning, policy making and decision making.

In a very real sense, the process of institutional research should be an integral part of the total process of strategic change. The data to be collected, analysed and interpreted, moreover, do not need to be statistical. They can often comprise qualitative, descriptive, indicative information - even subjective impressions.

UCCQ and its Operating Environment

The University College of Central Queensland (UCCQ), formerly the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education (CIAE), commenced operations in 1967 at its campus in Rockhampton. During the 1980s it expanded its operations to offer teaching on branch campuses at four regional centres (Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone, Mackay).

Imperatives emerging from the external environment, including the Commonwealth's establishment of the 'unified national system' of higher education, prompted UCCQ to embark upon a process of planned strategic change, to make the transition from a regional college to full designation as the University of Central Queensland.

The need for change was agreed upon by the governing Council, senior management, academic leadership, and a 'critical mass' of individual staff.

The particular features of UCCQ, and how they relate to these imperatives, have been key determinants in shaping the need for institutional change, its speed and direction, and the processes and inputs through which changes have been considered, adopted, and implemented.

The State and Commonwealth governments had placed the onus on UCCQ to demonstrate that it had made acceptable progress in transforming its profile of activities from those of a 'college' toward those of a 'university'. In short, the imperative facing UCCQ was to pursue a strategic change in its mission and institutional profile, its portfolio of activities, and its policies, structures and modes of operation, including such aspects as:

- a substantial increase in research activity;
- an additional focus in pure research to complement existing effort in applied research and development;
- an associated shift from a primary focus in undergraduate teaching to incorporate a significant component of postgraduate teaching and research supervision;
- introduction of Honours programs, and further development of postgraduate research including doctoral programs;
- an associated increase in enrolments in relevant program areas;
- a commitment to scaling down/phasing out of activities in certain program areas and associated redeployment of resources;
- a major strengthening of research infrastructure including laboratories, library and computing infrastructure, and research support staff
- value systems, attitudes and organisational climate congruent with a 'university' mission;
- policies, procedures and organisational structures to facilitate all the above.

The parameters of UCCQ's operating environment produced some constraints which made the transition process especially difficult. Firstly, despite rapid growth since the mid-1980s, UCCQ was still relatively small; Whilst some staff were able to engage in research, heavy teaching workloads and the lack of funding for research infrastructure had militated against a strong research profile. At the same time, despite high operating costs associated with geographical remoteness, 'diseconomies' of scale, and the demands of a multi-campus operation, UCCQ had historically been funded for teaching activities at a level much lower than the average across Australia (18% below on DEET's relative funding model in 1990).

The UCCQ Planning Process

Legislation enacted by the Queensland Parliament provided for re-designation of the CIAE as the UCCQ from 1 January 1990. The institution had already undertaken the lengthy process of adapting existing governance and committee structures and formulating new policies and procedures relating to academic development, research management, and supporting activities. Under a formal sponsorship agreement, The University of Queensland would advise and assist UCCQ to develop its research capacity, infrastructure and research-based higher degree programs, provide co-supervision of research students, facilitate academic staff exchange and staff development and provide University of Queensland library access for UCCQ staff and students. Representatives would sit on the UCCQ academic board, the research and higher degree committee, and all selection committees for staff above the level of senior lecturer.

The Minister for Education appointed a panel of three distinguished academics, all former Vice-Chancellors, to visit and liaise with UCCQ, review its progress toward university-level activity, advise the Minister on UCCQ's progress and ultimately recommend whether the institution warranted designation as a university. It was envisaged that the panel would make this assessment in mid-1992.

The Initial Steps

Early in 1990, the newly-established Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee saw the need for a planning process which would:

- develop an action plan to achieve university designation by 1993; and
- consider achievement of the immediate goal of university designation within the broader context of desired long term role and mission as an evolving university.

A small working group was established as an ad hoc, joint subcommittee of the Academic Board and the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee, comprising: the President and Deputy President of the Academic Board; a representative of the Professoriate; a representative of the Deans; the Executive Assistant (Chancellery); and, subsequently, the newly appointed Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic and Research).

The planning process developed by the working group involved a 5-step cycle:

- identify issues for resolution;
- circulate and debate position papers based on self analysis;
- consider and identify key priorities by intensive 'planning colloquia';
- establish working parties to develop specific strategies and recommendations; and
- review and reassess.

Self-assessment and Analysis

Information is a vital input to the working of any planning process. Decisions about implementing future activities and about modifying existing activities to meet desired ends depend upon one's picture of the existing situation, extrapolation of this picture into future scenarios, and an assessment of the 'fit' of these scenarios to what is desired. To the extent that it can provide useful information to clarify either existing pictures or envisaged scenarios, institutional research can play a valuable role in this process.

The working group thus saw value in an assessment of the extent to which UCCQ currently 'performed' at 'university level'. A useful reference point on UCCQ's current performance was the AVCC statement *The Nature of a University* which outlined a number of qualitative criteria, and certain quantitative 'performance indicators' which should be associated with 'university' activity. Some measurement against these criteria should identify those aspects of UCCQ's profile which needed particular attention. This first phase of the planning process was thus aimed at identifying key issues for resolution.

Each of the six academic schools (and the administrative divisions) were invited to develop a "position paper" summarising the extent to which the school and its profile of activities reflected the AVCC qualitative criteria. Each Dean consulted widely with staff. As each school had a particular ethos, 'culture', and set of values which reflected its major discipline orientation and professional fields, it was accepted that the perceived relevance of the various criteria might differ across schools.

The Executive Assistant (Chancellery) also prepared a position paper on the extent to which UCCQ met the quantitative indicators. By compilation and assessment of statistical data from existing computer-based systems as well as via manual collection from primary sources within the schools, the following dimensions of activity were examined: student load by field of study; proportion of student load generated by postgraduate research students; level of competitive research grants gained by academic staff; frequency of refereed publications generated by staff; and level of staff academic qualifications.

Schools also produced position papers regarding the quantitative indicators, highlighting areas of activity which needed strengthening. Each school's active involvement in institutional self-assessment provoked a strong commitment and 'ownership' which more than compensated for any loss of statistical rigour in measurement of performance, and enhanced the quality of debate.

Acknowledging that sole reliance on the AVCC criteria would exclude several issues needing attention, the working party invited position papers on other areas of concern. Responses received dealt with such areas as teaching workloads, staff development, administrative support, library infrastructure, interdepartmental communication and collegiality, and communication in relation to decision-making. All position papers and responses were circulated within UCCQ as input to the process of debate leading to the planning colloquium.

Planning Colloquium 1990

The planning colloquium was seen by the working group as the crucial element of the UCCQ planning process. It comprised a full-day program of intense discussion involving a mix of plenary and syndicate sessions structured along the lines of a seminar 'retreat'. It involved more than 40 participants representing a cross-section of the UCCQ community (all senior academic and administrative managers, representatives of academic staff (including school-based representatives), general staff and students, and invited members of Council) and was to a large extent, a conventional 'strategic planning' exercise. Some features, however, are worth highlighting. Firstly, the consideration of desired mission and directions was undertaken in the light of the 'position papers', which provided a benchmark of current performance. This facilitated informed debate on directions of future development which were both desirable and necessary, and idealistic but realistic. Secondly, debate was structured around a set of questions which all small groups were asked to address:

- In the broad sense, what sort of university do we want to become (ie. what is our vision of our desired future profile)?
- What is our desired profile of academic program? (levels of award and balance between postgraduate and undergraduate courses, range/balance of disciplines and fields of study, student composition/target groups.)
- What is our desired research profile? (range and balance of activities, emphasis and special focus.)
- What community do we aim to serve, and what service do we aim to provide? (orientation of community service, any geographical or other focus and market niche, desired public image and profile.)
- What is our role as a national Distance Education Centre? (range and balance of courses, nature of service delivery, relative emphasis on internal and distance modes, role in relation to other institutions.)

The strategic planning process is generally promoted by its proponents (eg. Cope, 1981 and 1987; Owen, 1981 and 1990, etc.) as being inherently qualitative, subjective, intuitive, and above all, visionary. Institutional research in contrast is generally regarded as quantitative, factual, analytical, and as far as possible, 'objective'. Thus, what was attempted at UCCQ was to achieve a balance of perspectives between the analytical (ie. the factual and 'objective') and the intuitive (ie. the subjective and visionary), and a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative inputs.

Colloquium Outcomes

An interim report prepared by the Executive Assistant (Chancellery) in consultation with the working group, focussing on agreed elements of desired university mission and agreed priorities for action was distributed to all colloquium participants (who provided feedback to their particular constituencies). A more comprehensive working paper which incorporated a synthesis of the actions was then submitted to

the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee which initiated action to implement several recommendations, and established ad hoc working parties to transform proposals into more coherent plans.

The colloquium had been conceived as a forum for identifying a desired mission as a developing university, and for identifying specific areas where priority should be given to formulating strategies and action in pursuit of this mission. It was envisaged as the start of an ongoing process for achieving agreed directions of change. It more than succeeded in this aim, and went on to commence the actual specification of strategies and actions.

The development and implementation of strategies and actions which followed on from the colloquium was characterised by two features which should be highlighted.

Firstly, a number of the priorities for action were addressed by the formation of working parties with a specific brief (and limited life-span) to develop a coherent plan or framework of recommended actions. All of these working parties were established as ad hoc sub-committees reporting to an existing committee (eg. Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee, Academic Board, etc.) In other cases, actions were developed by existing committees or by managers of organisational units who would normally have responsibility for the particular areas of concern. Thus, the mechanisms for implementing change involved working through the existing committee system and reporting relationships. Apart from short-lived working parties, no separate 'planning' structures were superimposed on existing structures. This decision embodied the general principle adopted by the colloquium working group, that the process of strategic change would work most effectively if integrated into mainstream decision-making processes.

Secondly, as diverse actions were commenced simultaneously, there was a need for monitoring, liaison and coordination to ensure that recommended actions did not work at cross-purposes. This was achieved by having at least one member of the colloquium working group on each ad hoc working party, and for the working group to continue its facilitating role, reporting to the Academic Board and Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee.

A significant feature of the whole process was that it now became less 'linear' or sequential. The planning model had envisaged a straightforward progression from development of a mission statement comprising broad goals and directions, to development of strategies and finally development of specific actions. In practice, development of the mission statement took place concurrently with that of strategies and actions. Whilst this might seem cause for concern, the structuring of the colloquium and its strong agreement on the essential elements of desired future mission, meant that the priority areas identified for action were all broadly congruent with pursuit of this mission. The fact that the drafting of the actual statement of mission was not finalised, did not pose a significant problem. However, it may appear an unorthodox procedure!

At this point, it can be noted that the panel of distinguished academic visitors appointed by the State Minister had made an input of views to the pre-colloquium debate, had been kept informed of the colloquium process and outcomes, and had offered feedback.

Review and Assessment

At the June 1990 colloquium, the working group anticipated the need for a second colloquium at the end of 1990 or early 1991 to:

- review progress achieved in implementing strategies and actions;
- reassess the need for continued action (or, redirection of action) in the light of changes in the operating environment; and
- identify further areas for action.

Timely review is essential to any process of planned change. At UCCQ, this imperative was acknowledged. Two developments highlighted this point.

First was the increasing realisation of the need to formulate a more coherent vision of the future development of UCCQ as a multi-campus institution with branch campuses in four regional centres across Central Queensland (Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone, Mackay). This required UCCQ to incorporate into its forward planning, provision of additional student places, program offerings, and facilities at these campuses to meet the growing demand from the regional communities. A colloquium at the Mackay campus, moreover, had proposed that UCCQ develop as an 'integrated regional university, implying that the current concept of a main campus at Rockhampton with branch campuses at the regional centres was no longer adequate.

A second development was a change in institutional leadership, with the appointment in December 1990 of a new Vice-Chancellor who took up office in April 1991. The working group therefore involved the Vice-Chancellor designate in clarifying the second colloquium's aim and in shaping its program.

At this point the working group saw that institutional research (i.e. some institutional assessment) could again make a valuable contribution. The Executive Assistant thus drafted a position paper which summarised progress achieved in implementing actions in each priority area identified at the 1990 colloquium, and reviewed these outcomes in the light of changes in operating environment. Despite its synthesis of 'objective' and 'subjective' perspectives, it represented a relevant piece of institutional research. In reporting on outcomes, it was factual, and in assessing achievements, it attempted to be as 'objective' as the subject matter permitted. However, much assessment had to be qualitative, given that some priority areas had not been assigned quantifiable targets but had been addressed in terms of qualitative improvements (eg. improved collegiality, self-esteem). Overall, it offered a very different form of institutional assessment to that of the 1990 position paper, reflecting the view of the working group that the focus should be to reaffirm the 'directions of travel' which emerged from the colloquium, rather than to measure incremental improvement.

A second position paper prepared jointly by the Executive Assistant and the Deputy President of the Academic Board, synthesized working material generated by the small groups at the initial colloquium. In essence a qualitative assessment of UCCQ strengths and weaknesses and of environmental opportunities and threats, it offered a reference point for formulating strategies and actions to assist UCCQ's further development. To facilitate its usefulness, the paper was structured to deal separately with each of the following dimensions: teaching programs; research programs; community service; distance education; internal management and organisational culture; and environmental and situational factors (eg. regional and multi-campus features).

Second Planning Colloquium

This two-day colloquium was held in April 1991. A total of some 70 persons took part. Because of the increased number of participants, and the increased complexity of the agenda, external consultants were engaged as facilitators, and were briefed through discussions with the working group.

The program was structured to achieve its three-fold objective of:

- reviewing progress on the priority areas of concern arising from the initial colloquium;
- reassessing future directions in the light of progress and of changes in the operating environment; and
- identifying further development over the longer term as an evolving university.

As exposure to, and consideration of relevant issues, was again seen as essential to informed debate, papers were circulated for discussion. These included: the two working papers outlined above; the most recent draft of the university mission statement; a summary of the issues raised at the Mackay colloquium, and a position paper on the concept of the 'integrated regional university' (and invited responses); a

'position paper' from the Vice-Chancellor designate, outlining some thoughts on the challenges which UCCQ must confront; discussion papers prepared by individual members of the working group on the integrated regional university concept and the relationship between research and the concept of a university.

Responses to these papers from participants were invited and circulated in turn.

1991 Colloquium Outcomes

It is too soon (October 1991) to assess the outcomes of the second colloquium. By their very nature, they have involved the reaffirmation, refinement, and in a few cases, re-orientation of the directions of travel previously commenced, and the further development and implementation of action in pursuit of these. However, two key outcomes should be highlighted. Both relate to the agreed redirection of desired mission to emphasize the development of the university in partnership with its regional community.

The first has been the redrafting of the mission statement to incorporate this regional partnership. The redrafted statement is relatively brief - about 250 words. Structured around the key points of agreement which emerged at the colloquium, it simply outlines the major features of the desired future university.

The second has been the recognition, as embodied in the mission statement, that the future development of the university must relate to "...its role as an integrated multi-campus institution working in partnership with the Central Queensland community to realise the unique opportunities available within the region". Work is underway to articulate strategies which can bring this regional partnership more fully into being. As examples: the market analysis project is looking at market niches attuned to the educational needs and expectations of the Central Queensland community; a program of public information sessions and meetings has been building lines of communication and mutual understanding with community organisations and employers; efforts to increase collaborative research and consultancy with regional organisations (public and private) have succeeded in initiating a number of cooperative projects.

Interwoven with the achievement of regional partnership is the development of UCCQ as an 'integrated regional university'. Despite funding constraints, action is underway to construct new regional campus facilities and introduce new courses. Action has also been initiated to provide the enhanced communications infrastructure essential to operation as an integrated, multi-campus institution. These initiatives involve enhanced E-mail and related electronic communication links, including video-conference facilities. A further dimension of integrated multi-campus operation will be the increased availability of mixed-mode teaching at the regional campuses, blending distance education with face to face teaching for those who live at or near the regional centres. This will be facilitated by the distance education expertise and infrastructure built up at UCCQ in its role as a national DEC.

Other outcomes have contributed to further actions in several priority areas targeted by the first colloquium, including staff development (teaching skills, research skills, and personal development), research infrastructure development and research management, strategic marketing, and expanding the funding base. As well, new priority areas include capitalising on UCCQ's role as a national Distance Education Centre to develop innovative learning practices, and capitalising secondly on regional opportunities to achieve unique niches of excellence in both teaching and research. These complement the thrust toward developing the university's role in partnership with its region.

Some Further Developments

Concurrent with the planning colloquium activity over 1990-91, the panel of distinguished academic visitors appointed by the State Minister had been carrying out their task of considering UCCQ's progress towards university level activity. Although not active participants, they were kept informed of the process and its outcomes, and offered feedback. In addition, their role involved a series of in-depth visits to review and discuss with management, academic and general staff and student representatives, progress made and difficulties encountered. After each visit, they advised the Minister in a formal report.

In addition, in June 1991 a team of senior representatives from the Higher Education Council and the Department of Employment, Education and Training visited UCCQ for discussions to assess progress. As a result of the advice from the distinguished academic visitors, and the agreement of the Commonwealth Minister, the State Minister recommended that UCCQ be declared a university. Consequently, in September 1991 the University of Central Queensland Act was proclaimed. As from 1 January 1992, UCCQ becomes the University of Central Queensland, a full year earlier than that originally anticipated.

The Role of the Planning Process

It seems fair to conclude that the planned process of strategic change undertaken by UCCQ over the past two years has contributed to its designation as a university. The desired directions of travel identified and embarked upon, as a result of the colloquium process, could only have assisted in demonstrating that UCCQ had progressed substantially toward university activities and had the capacity to pursue these directions successfully. The nature of the planning process, and of the strategic change being pursued, made it clear that UCCQ's priorities were oriented not simply to the short term goal of university designation, but more importantly to long term development as a university with a distinctive mission and profile. This fact was unlikely to have escaped attention.

Experience gained from a number of quarters has shown that 'ownership' of decisions by those who will be directly affected or involved in their implementation is essential, both to the effective implementation of any decision to introduce change and to the ongoing support of the changes. Any organisation undertaking a process of strategic change should therefore involve all parties if it wishes the process to succeed.

This imperative was heeded at UCCQ. Academic and general staff, students, all organisational units, members of Council and its regional campus advisory committees, were involved through the invitation for an input of views, through consultation and feedback, and participation in colloquium debate through both ex-officio and elected representatives. As an integral part of this involvement, they received all position papers and were invited to respond. Whilst considerable time and energy was needed to facilitate and coordinate such a participatory process, the costs were believed to have been more than offset by the commitment and sense of ownership which resulted.

The colloquium outcomes would not have been possible without the support and enthusiasm shown by all sections of the UCCQ community - and by academic staff in particular. In this regard, it is worth noting that the panel of distinguished academic visitors, in providing their advice to the Minister, made particular mention of the evident commitment of staff to making the efforts needed to develop UCCQ into a university.

The Role of Institutional Research

The role of institutional research in facilitating a process of strategic change is, in essence, that of providing input to inform the process of discussion and decision-making. The example of UCCQ illustrates one way in which this can be achieved. Working toward strategic change (ie. strategic planning) requires essentially a qualitative, imaginative and visionary process. Thus, statistical data and analysis must be but one form of input amongst several. In recognition of this, the input of institutional research to UCCQ's processes were in part quantitative (ie. statistical analysis), but to a greater extent, qualitative. This was thought to match more closely the requirements of the process and the issues being addressed.

The approach adopted at UCCQ may not be as effective or relevant if applied elsewhere to different institutional circumstances. Depending upon the nature of the planning process and the overall orientation of the exercise, a stronger reliance on statistical information may be appropriate. This is not disputed. For instance, 'operational planning' has a much greater requirement for quantitative analysis based on statistical data.

Nevertheless, I would conclude by making two related suggestions: firstly, the nature of the information must be appropriate to the nature of the process for which it is provided, and secondly; the process of

strategic change is primarily visionary and qualitative - rather than one of quantification and measurement.

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