Academic Unification – Building a Comprehensive University

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Abstract

Three years' experience in the Higher Education sector, and over twenty years' experience with TAFE Queensland allowed me to be well positioned to become the Director of Academic Unification for CQUniversity Australia as it evolved into Queensland's first comprehensive university.

My experience across both sectors provided a springboard platform for the Academic Unification project to unfold upon.

This paper explores the lessons learned from the project experience and provides an evaluation of the research framework developed for the Academic Unification Project within the Dual Sector Program and the results of research activities including industry consultation, academic stakeholder events and market analysis that informed the development of the new governance and academic models, systems and language for the comprehensive CQUniversity.

The Academic Unification project supports the development of $49 million of capital and infrastructure projects within the Dual Sector Program that will provide modern and innovative resources for the University's new programs.

These models have provided the framework for a program of change to existing CQUniversity structures in order to accommodate the new Vocational Education and Training (VET) Division and the governance framework for the new qualifications that will be developed.

This paper explores the themes unpinning the development of a joint framework for qualification development and how this has contributed to the success of the merger by providing the building blocks for the development of new and innovative qualifications.

The inter-dependencies between the strategic and operational perspectives are further explored in this paper; this includes technological, cultural and practical issues.

Drawing from the Project Director's experience of bringing the two cultures and approaches together, this paper explores the key challenges and considerations in representing both the VET and the higher education perspectives in the development of new qualifications.

Introduction

The prime purpose of this paper is to share the journey of the lived project experience, in particular, the intertwining of the people (two cultures), the academic governance (two Australian regulators and two vastly different internal tertiary course processes and governance frameworks), the information technology systems (TAFE Queensland and CQUniversity IT systems), and the communication strategies used to draw all the project interdependencies and people together.

Information is drawn from the Project Director's experience as the practitioner, project planning and reporting documents, Best practice in dual-sector integration research undertaken by KPMG on behalf of the project, the project evaluation findings, and related literature readings.

The project description - *By the reconceptualisation of continuing education and training, fluid pathways will form the foundation for students to experience life-long learning within one organisation, offering bi-directional vocational training and higher education options in a dual sector environment.*

The project purpose - *The Academic Unification Project will manage alterations and enhancements of curricula across all programs of both systems in the development of models and strategies to provide a seamless pathway post High School through to Higher Education. Post school pathways will be designed and created to ensure accessibility for students is streamlined and easy to navigate. This will result in increased program offerings from both sides of the VET and HE components of the university. The enhancements will focus on accessibility, innovative curriculum & programs, exit points and clearly defined pathways.*

The project objective - *The curriculum redesign to enhance access and participation will become systemic within the dual sector organisation. Being systemic will ensure bi-directional study pathways are established; streamlined and automated enrolment and administrative processes are created and implemented; and innovative curriculum is designed so that it is both appealing to students and results in graduates with the attributes sought by industry, government and the community. To achieve this outcome the project must embed these strategies within the corporate governance and quality systems of the organisation. The process of building a seamless pathway framework with access to innovative curriculum models will provide opportunities to bring two cultures together to ensure that the dual sector development is culturally inclusive and aware of the needs of vocational training and higher education as we become a dual sector organisation.*

The Project Journey Findings and Challenges

As a project team, we set out to achieve the overall project aim which was to provide fluid pathways offering bi-directional vocational training and higher education options for our students within the one tertiary institution.

Students were to have one student identifier number, be able to take advantage of articulation pathways with credit, value add training workshops and skill sets at the vocational level to enhance their degree employability outcomes, and have access to interim awards at the vocational level.

The university itself was to be supported through the redesign of the academic governance framework and the design and implementation of new IT systems and solutions to support the governance and curriculum models and curriculum strategies. At the same time, the cultural aspects of the vocational staff and students and the higher education staff and students had to be considered.

One of our first project discoveries was that CQ TAFE predominately delivered certificate III courses with minimal diploma courses on scope of registration, particularly in the trade areas and also in some areas of business. This meant there was a gap which the project had to address if it was to establish seamless pathways and articulation with credit. How could CQUniversity become a truly comprehensive university if AQF levels 4 and 5 were missing?

The project addressed this vocational deficiency by adding ten certificate IVs and twelve diploma qualifications to our scope of registration. Market research and industry consultation were key drivers in determining the discipline areas of these 22 new vocational qualifications and their course content. Industry engagement is a university's relationships with the wider business community. CQUniversity recognises industry is a key stakeholder in the outcomes of a dual-sector university and, as such, works closely to engage with them.

The project facilitated collaborative discussions between the relevant higher education managers and academics and the TAFE managers to discuss pathways, articulations and credit points. Selection of vocational electives was of significant importance to try and maximise potential credit and prepare vocational students for higher education studies.

At first glance, one may think that articulation from a vocational diploma course into a higher education degree program through a pathway to offer eight credit points (one year credit) would be relatively simple to achieve particularly in discipline areas where a synergy exists, for example in business, within a dual sector institution.

Putting aside the cultural and IT system differences and reporting to two levels of government, the volume of learning and the fact that vocational courses are focussed on job skills rather than academic outcomes proved to be barriers. Moodie and Wheelahan 2011 suggest there is a deep division in Australian institutions partly because each sector has a different curriculum model and because of Australia's different constitutional arrangements.

Moodie and Wheelahan go on to say that all Australian national vocational qualifications are defined not by content but by workplace outcomes 'so there is no such thing as curriculum in Australian national vocational education qualification statements'.

All vocational qualification outcomes are defined by competencies which are defined as the application of specified knowledge, skill and attitudes needed to undertake a work role or task to the workplace standard. While it may appear that there is a role for knowledge in vocational education qualifications, it is limited because knowledge 'should only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work' (DEST, 2006, p.114).

This means that the vocational qualification focus is on contextually specific applications of knowledge rather than academic or applied academic disciplines. 'Developing study skills and the skills and theoretical knowledge to proceed to further education in the field are not workplace competencies and so are not included as outcomes in vocational education qualifications.' (Wheelahan and Carter, 2001).

During project meeting discussions with CQUniversity academics, some expressed statements reflective of the differences between the sectors in line with Moodie and Wheelahan's findings.

Specifically, some academics stated 'vocational training teaches students how to do the work task, whereas higher education provides students the expression of ideas, knowledge and information, exploring academic issues and promoting the mind to develop further based on ideas and theories and not related to practical efforts.'

This situation is a reality and one that is possibly not recognised by all levels of the University yet is proving to remain a barrier to the project in some discipline areas.

The Academic Unification project has delivered the following outcomes:-
- Vocational managers and teachers wanting articulation;
- Higher education managers and lecturers willing to explore articulation pathways, and wanting articulations in place to use the pathway as a feeder;
- Certificate IV & diploma vocational qualifications newly added to scope of registration to bridge the gap;
- An articulations business process and workflow;
- A newly designed and developed IT system to support the articulations business process;
- A 'How to do Articulations and Mapping Handbook' has been developed;
- Information forums and training in process and systems has taken place;
- A new vocational course IT system developed to interface with the higher education IT system, push content to the student management system, University Handbook, and University website – therefore providing information for all areas of the university including marketing, recruitment and enrolment staff;
- An approved new academic governance framework to support a dual sector university;
- Policies and procedures have been reviewed;
- Integrated sub-committees in order to facilitate communication and understanding;
- Pathways from certificate III to Bachelor degree have been identified;
- The Information Technology Department is working towards implementing the one student management system;
- An Academic Unification project director and project team supporting and facilitating internal discussions between the two sectors; and
- All internally within Queensland's first dual sector university.

Despite all of the above, we still have a way to go to achieve articulation with eight credit points in some like discipline areas.

The KPMG Best practice in dual-sector integration final report 2014 found the academic framework for accrediting vocational pathways requires governance arrangements. 'Academic research in recent years has underscored the importance of harmonising recognition of prior learning between vocational and higher education. During the period from the mid-90s until 2005, the Australian Vice-Chancellors and the Australian National Training Authority attempted to harmonise recognition of prior learning and credit transfers between vocational and higher education.'

Researchers have argued that standardising recognition of post-secondary units of study would improve articulation between vocational and higher education. However, standardised industry-wide recognition of prior learning has not been widely or consistently adopted. KPMG recommend 'there may be a need for dual-sector universities to develop a clear, internal standard of credit transfer to facilitate intra-institutional articulation.'

Further to this, Ballantyne 2012, suggests that intersectoral tensions exist at the low levels in dual sector organisations and that there are little or no attempts on a regular or systematic basis to bring people from across the TAFE – HE divide other than to work on specific or focussed issues such as accreditation, pathway, and credit exemptions.

Because less information is systematically transmitted there exists the probability of more tensions and misconceptions being generated at this level between TAFE teachers, HE academics, students and administrators. Ballantyne 2012, p.119, 'Students enrolled in the HE division who happen to be currently undertaking TAFE subjects can find themselves shunted back and forth between the sectors.'

They often receive the impression that nobody knows what they are doing. In addition when inadequate communication occurs and cultural tensions left unaddressed between the two sectors there is little way of identifying whether or not the material taught at TAFE level is responsive to the material taught at HE level later on.

The KPMG Best practice in dual-sector integration research, 2014, further suggests dual-sector universities face challenges communicating the administrative, vocational and higher education requirements of developing a dual-sector course.

In a published series of interviews, it was found that teaching staff often constructed the teaching environment without consideration of the administration requirements.

Many staff were unable to describe the administrative processes and costs associated with developing new courses, including enrolment, accreditation, timetabling, etc. Wheelehan 2000, p.40, 'It may pose a risk to the seamlessness of student experience if administration between sectors is inconsistent or imposes additional barriers to the student'.

Conclusion

The following diagram (see **Figure 1**) captures the findings that cultural integration is most effective when senior leadership and student administration are closely integrated.

By contrast, academic staff at the course development and delivery level are most effective when their unique sectoral differences are acknowledged within a context of having a shared mission and some overlap in the area of course content.

From the previously listed project achievements, it can be determined that CQUniversity is well positioned in having dual sector systemic governance, administrative, and information systems to support the sector differences while, at the same time, facilitating bi-directional seamless pathways for students. Cultural differences also benefit from the systemic processes, governance and systems, likewise do industry and students.
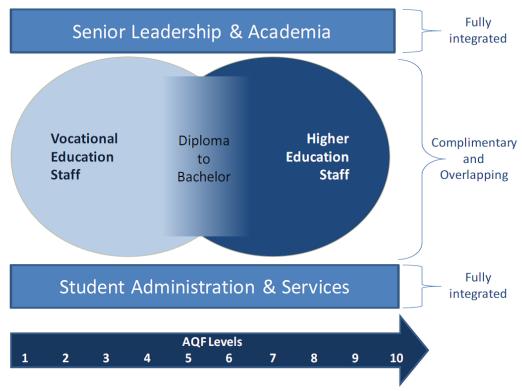
Figure 1: *Distinct but complimentary cultural integration*
KPMG, (2014), Best Practice in Dual-Sector Integration – Central Queensland University

The outcomes of the Academic Unification project are currently under review, the evaluation and development of an evaluation report is being conducted by an independent executive officer. Evaluation findings to date indicate that the project outcomes were achieved.

This is a positive position for CQUniversity to be in as Garrod & MacFarlane, 2009 suggest in Australia that we need to challenge the boundaries in the field of higher education and further education sectors, to bring about a radical new way of organising post-secondary education that directly promotes a social justice agenda and the widening of student participation.

CQUniversity is Australia's most engaged university, directly engaging with industry and communities. We have a widening student participation program for our higher education students and we are looking to roll this out to our vocational students.

With the CQUniversity and CQ TAFE merger only taking place on 1st July 2014, CQUniversity has achieved a vast volume of work to build the systemic dual sector framework encompassing people (culture), governance, information technology systems, and business processes.

This work will continue as we transition to embed Queensland's first comprehensive university.

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