The changing role of planning units in universities: Renewing our approach and future directions

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Abstract

The past decade has witnessed significant change in the role and responsibilities of planning units within Australian universities. The main change has been a broadening of the role from routine data analysis to a comprehensive set of responsibilities that commonly include: strategic planning, coordination of internal and external reviews, quality assurance and improvement, institutional performance monitoring, strategic internal and external reporting, management of a raft of stakeholder surveys, institutional research, provision of strategic advice on government policy directions and other external drivers of change and, in some cases, complaints management. The article outlines the changing role and accountabilities of planning units in Australian universities in light of rapidly evolving changes in government policy on quality assurance and compliance with external reference points, performance-based funding, the social inclusion agenda, and various types of accreditations and performance monitoring. It is argued that planning units can and must play an important role in the ever-changing landscape, yet there has been little attention paid to this topic in the literature. This is a serious gap, given the magnitude and rapidity of the change occurring in the Australian tertiary education sector and in the national economy and society more broadly.

Keywords: Planning units, changing roles, and new accountability

The Australian tertiary education sector is going through unprecedented change with the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the introduction of a range of important reforms. Key policy changes include: funding of actual student places in universities; encouragement of competition, diversity and student choice; performance-based funding with an increased focus on student experience and student attainment of learning outcomes; improving access and participation for disadvantaged students; the establishment of the *My University* website with public access to institutional performance information on universities; and strengthened quality assurance with a focus on academic standards, academic risk and compliance to external benchmarks and standards. Taken together, these initiatives have the potential to give Australia one of the most robust and rigorous quality assurance frameworks of any tertiary education sector worldwide.

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The changes and reforms being initiated by the Commonwealth require universities to have effective processes for strategic planning; reviews of faculties, administrative units, academic programs and policies and procedures; data and information coordination and the associated internal and external strategic reporting (including statutory reporting); and quality assurance and continuous improvement. The increased focus on quality assurance and improving educational and research outcomes requires institutions to have well-structured, well-resourced, well-informed and well-skilled planning and quality units—well-positioned to support the university in tracking and improving performance across all areas of operation. Shah and Skaines (2008) argue that the planning office should play an active role in strategic planning, reviews, quality assurance, data analysis and reporting, managing stakeholder surveys, institutional research and implementing and evaluating improvement activities. The role extends across all core areas (learning and teaching, research, engagement and internationalisation) and all support functions and university entities.

It is evident that the new quality assurance framework in tertiary education will place increased attention on academic standards, academic risk, benchmarking and external compliance, and there will be huge reliance on the use of quantitative measures to assess and reward institutional performance. This means that universities will require robust and reliable IT-enabled data management systems, and that they will need to make effective use of available data at the university, faculty, course, and unit of study and teacher levels to identify areas needing improvement and to action improvement systematically. The changing landscape also requires the development of an academic workforce that engages with academic quality and strives to improve educational and research outcomes for students and organisational clients and partners.

The role of planning units in Australian universities has already changed considerably over the past 30 years. This role has broadened from statistical analysis and reporting to a much wider one that includes strategy development and reviews; quality assurance and improvements; internal and external reporting of data; managing stakeholder surveys; institutional research activities; and working closely with diverse stakeholders to implement change and improvements.

Methodology

This article analyses the changing role of planning units in Australian universities from the 1980s to the current context. The role of planning units from 1980s and the ongoing changes are based on the authors' experiences in Australian higher education sector. The analyses of the current structure and responsibilities of planning units are based on the review of planning unit websites undertaken by the authors with 37 Australian universities. The authors reviewed the websites of 37 out of 39 Australian university planning unit websites. Two universities did not have dedicated website for planning functions. The authors also reviewed all university AUQA cycle 1 and cycle 2 audits report available until June 2011.

The Traditional Role of Planning Units (1980s–2004)

In the 1980s, few Australian universities had planning units and dedicated planning staff; those that did had a unit (usually called the 'Statistics Unit' or something similar) with responsibilities largely restricted to data analysis, statutory reporting and some strategic internal reporting. Traditionally, many functions that now sit with planning units were

managed by other areas of the university. For example, in many universities the Vice-Chancellor's office coordinated the development of strategic plans and initiated reviews of organisational units, teacher and unit evaluations were undertaken by teaching and learning centres, and other surveys were managed by various units/departments across the university. There was an absence of centralised data repository in a single unit for data domains such as finance, human resources, student enrolments, equity, learning and teaching outcomes, research outcomes, international education, engagement and environmental sustainability. The analysis of data was done manually using spreadsheet software and reporting was accomplished using a large volume of discrete reports.

What's Changed?

The past thirty years have witnessed significant change in Australian tertiary education, mostly driven by a rapidly changing operating environment that has had ongoing impact on policymakers, hence on university management, and ultimately on university staff and students. Some of many changes affecting the operating environment include the burgeoning student populations, increased student diversity and increased use of new and increasingly powerful ICTs. Accompanying these are the increases in: internationalisation and globalisation, levels of competition, tuition fees, the demand for quality and 'value for money' by various stakeholders and flexible modes of learning are (Shah and Nair, 2011).

The establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and the subsequent establishment of TEQSA and the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) provide an example of changes in government policy arising from changes in the external environment. Such changes have arisen particularly from a desire to safeguard and improve the quality, reputation and competitiveness of Australian tertiary education in the light of real and perceived threats and in the light of international trends and developments including the Bologna process (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). Moves to boost participation in tertiary education provide another example, driven by equity issues, a desire to address skill shortages, and other factors (Shah et al., 2011).

While the Commonwealth and state governments have provided a large measure of autonomy to universities in the past, the new policies related to performance-based funding and improving the quality and standard of student outcomes are challenging this autonomy. There is increasing scrutiny of educational and research outcomes, and this increased scrutiny coincides with:

- an ongoing decrease in public funding of universities, in real terms, and thus increasing reliance on external sources of income such as fee-paying international students, onshore and offshore
- increased performance monitoring such as mandatory national stakeholder surveys, the annual Institutional Performance Portfolio reporting process (formerly known as the Institutional Assessment Framework process, between 2004–2009, and the Educational Profiles submission, prior to 2004
- introduction of external quality audits on a five-year cycle by an external agency
- introduction of performance-based funding (for example, through the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund [LTPF] using various educational measures such as student

retention, progression, and graduate satisfaction and employment outcomes) and the new Performance Funding Framework effective from 2012

- introduction of research performance monitoring via the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) process
- increased prominence of the student voice, with a focus on improving teaching quality
- development of the *My University* website to provide the public with information on the performance of universities on various measures
- the possible introduction of home-grown university ranking systems, adding to the proliferation and expansion of the existing international systems.

These changes have shaped the review and restructuring of university planning units, with a view to improving their effectiveness and efficiency by combining many diverse functions into a single business unit. In this context, internal reviews with a focus on cost-saving, efficiency and error reduction have been key contributors in divisional restructures in many universities. For example, in one large multicampus university senior management restructured the Office of Planning and Quality with the appointment of Pro Vice-Chancellor, Quality with responsibilities related to: strategy development, implementation and reviews; quality assurance; improvement as a direct result of reviews and stakeholder feedback; coordination of internal and external reporting; data, information and performance monitoring; survey and institutional research, complaints management; coordination of internal and external reviews; and university sustainability. In the same institution, an internal review of administrative divisions resulted in the centralisation of all stakeholder survey management into the Planning and Quality Unit. This included moving responsibility for teacher and unit evaluation from teaching and learning centres to the Planning and Quality Unit.

New Directions

Current changes in government policy and ongoing reviews and restructures within universities will continue to place increased accountability on planning and quality units to deliver outcomes that assist university management to make timely and evidence-based decisions, and to provide the information needed to meet governance requirements. This increased accountability will also derive from greater external accountability requirements and the move to emphasise performance-based funding.

At present, within the Australian university sector there is almost a 50:50 split between planning and quality units reporting to academic leaders such as Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic (55%) or administrative leaders such as Chief Operating Officer (45%), and the responsibilities of these units vary. Apart from the services now provided by virtually all Planning and Quality Units, some universities (e.g., University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University) manage university-wide student complaints; have policy and governance responsibilities (e.g., RMIT University and Victoria University); coordinate risk management (e.g., Charles Sturt University); and have carriage of equity and access issues (e.g., Edith Cowan University).

Recent years have also witnessed the merger of planning and quality units with the finance office in some universities (e.g., Griffith University, the University of Southern Queensland and Queensland University of Technology). In other institutions (e.g., Central

Queensland University, Charles Darwin University, and Deakin University), quality functions have been absorbed into new units responsible for learning and teaching quality

Despite these differences, there are many commonalities, in terms of accountabilities, between the various analogous units across many institutions. Table 1 outlines the changing responsibilities of planning units from 1980s to 1990s, post 2005, and current and future responsibilities.

Table 1

Changing Role of Planning Units in Australian Universities

1980s–1990s	Post 2005	Current and Future
• Student load planning and management information capability • Internal and external reporting	• Strategic planning and reviews • Data and performance reporting • Stakeholder surveys • Coordination of internal and external reviews • Quality assurance	• Review of strategic and lower level plans • Advice of risk related to strategy implementation and resourcing • Timely data and performance reporting using trends, and benchmarks • Centralising all university data: student load, learning and teaching outcomes, research outcomes, finance, human resources, sustainability, and international • Tracking and enhancement of student experience • Coordinating course accreditations • Coordination of university-wide reviews • Closing the loop on reviews and student feedback • Strategic advice on a wide range of areas • Institutional research and strategic intelligence • Student complaints management • Compliance to external reference points • Influencing decision-making based on data • Engaging faculties, school, entities and offshore partners

Over recent years, the number of staff in planning and quality units has increased from 2–5 in the 1980s to 10–35 currently. Further, most universities now use online stakeholder surveys to strengthen the student, graduate, staff and industry 'voice', and business intelligence software (and often data warehouse technologies) to provide more comprehensive and more reliable reporting combined with greater flexibility in terms of customised querying and report design. Increasingly, steps have been taken to centralise all data across the university within the planning and quality unit with a view to having a single custodian for financial, human resources, student load and enrolments, learning and teaching, research, international education, engagement, and finally facilities and sustainability data.

This approach allows course-level analysis of the cost and expenditure of running programs, and innovative ways of presenting data for various target groups. For example, some universities produce annual course reports before the planning and budget process commences for the following year. Such reports provide three years of trend benchmarked performance data with various indicators at the university, faculty, and course and subject level. This allows senior management, faculty deans, associate deans, heads of program and

unit coordinators to track and improve learning and teaching outcomes. The academic leadership in planning and quality units enables collaboration with learning and teaching centres, academic skills centres, access and equity offices, student support; and university entities to use various performance data in tracking and improving performance. For example, the results of the end of semester teacher and unit evaluations and annual course reports produced by planning and quality units can be used to inform future academic professional development and improve student retention. Moreover, the effective use of student experience data sheds light on the experience of various student cohorts and identifies any correlations between satisfaction factors, retention and progression.

Finally, sophisticated data analysis and reporting of student survey findings, combined with knowledge of the various aspects of academic quality, can foster discussion on ways to improve the quality management of student assessment. The need to improve assessment has been a recurring theme across the tertiary education sector in Australia and elsewhere for many years.

New Roles, New Challenges and New Accountabilities

Changing government policy, the formation of TEQSA and the new performance funding framework are investing planning and quality units with new challenges and accountabilities. The linking of millions of dollars in performance funding to quantitative measures requires universities to rethink the leadership, structure, expertise and resourcing of planning and quality units so that these units can meet the needs of universities and external stakeholders (especially including government). The introduction of performance-based funding via the LTPF raised significant controversy some years ago, with some vice-chancellors questioning the credibility of the data collected, coding practices, and survey response rates and the validity and representativeness of survey data. For example, one prominent vice-chancellor stated that:

> Methodologically the collection of data is (left) up to universities, with (student) response rates and coverage varying widely around the sector…There is no audit of this collection and strong suspicions exist that some data are corrupted by the shoddy practices in some institutions. (Illing, 2005, p, 1)

The media also reported that 'Universities' ability to influence student survey outcomes is under scrutiny amid moves to transform the surveys into better instruments for determining funding allocations (Armitage, 2006, p. 19). The apparently declining reputation and financial standing of some universities in recent times (with low student demand, high student attrition, substantial budget deficits, and so forth) cast doubt on the robustness and reliability of university data and the information systems that have informed management decision-making and university governance.

Further external scrutiny through AUQA quality audits of universities since 2002 has raised concerns about the role and effectiveness of planning units and their capacity to provide timely and accurate data to support decision-making. For example, in one university an audit report highlighted that

> the university should ensure, as a matter of priority, that the information provided to the Council and to senior management on the performance of the University is accurate,

comprehensive and at the appropriate level of detail to support informed decision making. (University X, 2009, p. 2)

The first cycle of external quality audits raised concerns in almost all universities as to how student survey data are used and improvements are made to enhance the student experience. The outcome of AUQA audits suggests that universities without a well-structured planning and quality unit and a correspondingly increased reliance on faculties to take ownership of quality assurance have, to some extent, failed to track and improve quality. For example, for one university the audit report suggested that

the panel finds insufficient urgency is evident within university Y on overcoming the current limitations of data management and enabling faculties and some of their key committees, such as higher degree committees and committees concerned with learning and teaching, to carry out their business to the fullest extent with the aim of improving quality at the local level. (University Y, 2011, p. 11)

For another university, the AUQA cycle 1 and cycle 2 audit reports included an explicit affirmation and an explicit recommendation, respectively, on improving data and information management capacity in decision-making. The cycle 1 audit affirmation stated that 'The University needs to improve the management information available to managers at various levels to assist with the execution of their planning, decision‑making and performance monitoring responsibilities' (University W, 2005, p. 17). Due to lack of follow-up on the affirmation, the cycle 2 audit report of the same university included a similar recommendation that: 'The University develop and implement an integrated institutional data strategy to support the planning, management, monitoring and improvement of University activities' (University W, 2010, p. 16).

The use of student survey data in the annual performance development and review processes used to determine academic promotion (and sometimes reward)—along with research measures—places increased scrutiny on the role and functions of planning units in the collection, analysis and reporting of data. The increased intrusion on academic autonomy as a result of performance-based funding raises further questions on ethical practices and policies surrounding the collection, analysis, coding and reporting of student survey data, especially since online surveys typically have lower response rates than paper-based surveys (Stowell et al., 2011) and record lower levels of student satisfaction (Nowell, Gale, & Handley, 2010). This change in survey methodology raises a question as to whether justice is always done to academic staff if their performance is evaluated using a small and perhaps unrepresentative number of survey responses. A subsidiary question relates to whether or not planning and quality units might be best served by more academic leadership than is (usually) the case at present in an environment where there is increased focus on educational and research quality and on academic standards and outcomes.

Conclusion

The introduction of an information standards framework, the *My University* website, a new performance indicator framework and performance-based funding (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) will increase the accountability of university planning and quality units. The new government policies may also necessitate internal changes, such as aligning external review processes with internal systems and quality assurance strategies. The changing

landscape of Australian higher education with focus on performance outcomes could result in additional responsibilities for planning units.

Some of the responsibilities may include:

- strategic policy advice on the impact of government policy on the institution
- strategic intelligence based on both internal and external operating environments, including intelligence on international trends in tertiary education
- advice on academic and other risk related to strategy implementation and resourcing
- institutional research in emerging areas
- influencing decision-making based on quantitative data and other evidence, and support for the development of a culture of evidence-based decision-making
- strengthened engagement of faculties and administrative units in strategic planning and quality management
- student complaints management with the view to centralisation and triangulation of data
- ongoing compliance to external reference points
- active work with management and governance committees.

The evolving external environment (including government policy, technological and cultural change) and internal factors will require planning and quality units to be innovative in delivering improved information and analysis to support strategic decision-making and thus long-term organisational viability. As well, the new performance-based funding environment will place significant responsibility on these units to coordinate strategy formulation, implementation and robust review processes. These roles will certainly demand much more than number crunching. They will necessitate collaboration with many players in all core and support areas. Ultimately, the task is not only to have a long-term strategy, but to implement the strategy effectively with the engagement of all staff, and to ensure the alignment of the institutional strategy with resourcing and rigorous risk management. The collection and reporting of data is just one element in the process. More important will be the quality of the available data, the timeliness of that availability, and how data are used to support decision-making at all levels. The quality, availability and use of the data, in turn, will depend on the way in which the planning and quality unit interfaces with the different personalities and the prevailing internal politics to influence future directions on the basis of organisational mission and vision, a clear understanding of the needs and expectations of students and other stakeholders, the available evidence, and triangulation of all relevant data and information sources.

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