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STEPPING ACROSS THE BINARY LINE : A CASE STUDY OF CHANGE AT  
THE QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a study<sup>1</sup> carried out at the Queensland University of Technology during the Spring of 1989. Its purpose was to record perceptions of change at the institution since 1983 as seen through the eyes of senior staff. The study found that by reacting to new social and economic imperatives senior management made changes to the structure and management procedures of the institution. This has resulted in more streamlined planning and budgeting methods and has increased the accountability of staff. The changes have also resulted in a changed culture; from being fundamentally a teaching institution to one which is more attuned to the hard edge of the marketplace. The vision of the new institution is that of a proactive, dynamic and competitive organisation while remaining responsive to local and national needs. At the same time change has taken its toll and it

has been suggested that personnel will require continued support if the changes taking place can have a salutary effect.<sup>2</sup>

#### EXTERNAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

There appear to be two competing cultures influencing the philosophy, attitudes, beliefs and shared values which are factors in the changing nature of higher education institutions at the present time. These cultures may be defined as the corporate culture and the University culture.

At the same time directives to, and funding of, institutions have a major impact. These influences can be elaborated in the following way. The concept of the building of a corporate culture which focuses on the organisational norms and values and sees those in authority as the direction setters, has been used extensively when studying change in organisations (e.g. Deal & Kennedy 1982, Inzerilli & Rosen 1983, Pascale 1985, Peters & Waterman 1982, Sharplen 1985,) However, this approach assumes there is a need to improve the authority of managers. Bates (1989) argues that corporate culture is equated with a managerial approach in such studies. There is no recognition of the concept of culture which depends on the relationships, norms and values of all those who interact with each other in the institution. This is particularly the case in times of significant change in an institution. Greenfield (1986) considers the fact that it is people who are responsible for organisations and people who change them and we need to understand the actions of such people.

University culture is based on very different traditions from that of corporate culture. Their traditions go back to the times when disciples sat at the feet of scholars. As institutions they have survived for many centuries. While the institutions have become more structured, the notion of professional autonomy has remained unchanged. Universities may be defined as a loosely coupled (cf Weick 1986) collection of scholars who largely maintain control over their own time, the content of their classroom activity, and their research. Academic freedom has been accepted by the broader society, in which there has been a belief that knowledge and insights are products of independent minds. Furthermore, there is the belief that qualified men and women should be free to pursue their self-directed work. In return for such freedom and independence those in universities must contribute to the life and vitality of the country.

In 1987-88, this contribution to the country has been severely questioned by the Federal Government.

During this time a series of ministerial statements, followed by wide-ranging community discussion, with its centre-piece the Green Paper, signalled changes to the organisation, funding of higher education and changes in curriculum that clearly gave preference to disciplines associated with science and technology (Dawkins, 1987, 1988; Harman and Meek, 1988).

Throughout the public debate the Government has been explicit about its motivation for intervening in higher education. The priority being

given to international economic competitiveness as a motivating factor is a consistent and overriding theme.

Another consistent feature of this intervention is the premise of the Green Paper that higher education must be reformed and expanded without placing extra demands on Commonwealth expenditure (Dawkins, 1987). This cost-benefit logic, paralleling the Federal Treasurer's commitment to reduce public sector spending, may well be the crux of the new policy initiatives (Boreham, Dow, Littler and Stewart 1988). Though the alignment of education with economic viability remains the basic approach, this position has been contested and has produced a great deal of controversy in both the academic and business communities. (Preston 1988, Stretton 1989)

This then is the broad context in which this study was conducted.

#### METHODOLOGY

The methodology has employed a democratic reflective interview approach and document analysis. It has been interpretive, retrieving meaning from people without prescribing what was to be found. Accounts and interpretations of interview material were sent to each person interviewed prior to release. The study provides information. It is not of the 'expert' type which provides a particular view of data. Rather, it aims to represent the participant's own perception of changes in policy and practice. However, it is presented within a conceptual framework which emphasises the changed nature of the culture of QUT. The notion of the competing cultures of business and academia emerged during the interviews and provided a conceptual link between the traditions of the past and the practices of the present. A total of fifty senior personnel were interviewed in the study.

#### CHANGES IN THE INSTITUTION

##### QIT - A Tradition of Sound Teaching

As an Institute of Technology, QIT developed over the years, a reputation for the strength of its teaching and the quality of its graduates.

The geographic location of the campus, close as it is to Government and the Central Business District, was considered to be an invaluable asset. It meant that there could be easy and frequent interaction between academics and professionals in law, industry and commerce.

However, QIT had only limited autonomy since it was answerable to the Board of Advanced Education which, in turn, would make representation to the Federal Government on behalf of colleges. This meant that QIT was unable to react swiftly to changes in demand for new courses.

At the same relatively little time or funds were set aside for the pursuit of research interests.

##### A NEW IMAGE FOR QUT

By 1983 it was clear that, given increasing competition for a relatively small parcel of Federal Funds available to the tertiary sector, the

viability of tertiary institutions would depend upon the image that those institutions and the individuals therein, presented to the outside world.

To flourish they needed to be able to attract gifted academics, good students and money. Tertiary institutions had to have a reputation for good teaching, academic expertise in a range of areas, a significant research output and the ability to react quickly to the demand for new courses.

To meet these new demands, top management began to form a team that would build a fuller, richer, forward-looking institution. It would be vibrant, responsive to market needs, entrepreneurial and highly competitive. There would have to be widespread changes to the structure of the institution, the responsibilities of individuals and the accountability of all staff including senior management.

## CHANGES INSIDE QUT

### Management Structure

In accordance with line management principles, academic and administrative responsibilities are divided into two categories. The first category includes the Inner Circle, who have been the catalysts and policy makers together with the Deans whose tasks have been policy-making and managing the change. The second group includes Heads of Schools and Departments who are the operational managers.

### The Inner Circle and the Deans

The Inner Circle consists of individuals who now hold the posts of Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Registrar, Financial Manager and, more recently, the Acting Pro Vice Chancellor (Research). Close contact is maintained with the Chancellor and Deputy Chancellor.

To bring about change the Inner Circle required a management team that could implement policy by initiating change in their own faculties.

These are now designated Deans of Faculties.

Faculties have been run as cost centres and the Deans have taken on more of a managerial role.

### Heads of Schools and Departments

Heads of Schools and Departments may be seen as operational managers. They form the key administrative and communication points between the Inner Circle and Deans on the one hand and the academic and general staff on the other. The organisational proximity to 'the coalface' directly involves them in communication and the maintenance of staff and institutional morale.

### Strategies for Change

#### Faculty Funding and Funds from Other Sources

Through a system of one-line Faculty funding Deans have been given greater control over the allocation of money for teaching, research and

building. Deans are expected to decrease the dependence of the institution on Federal funds by seeking funds from other sources. Academic leaders have been encouraged to go out into the corridors of power, to become fund raisers and friend raisers.

#### Action Planning

An Action Planning strategy has been introduced as a means of structuring the change process and at the same time monitoring its progress. It involves Faculties, Schools and Departments in long and short term goal setting and the identification of indicators of success.

#### Joint Goal Setting and Review

Both teaching performance and research output of individuals are also monitored. By such means all staff members in the institution are held accountable.

#### Increased Research Emphasis

More recently management has moved to increase staff involvement in research. For instance, seed money for pilot projects has been made available. The position of Pro Vice Chancellor (Research) was established to promote research in the institution. Centres have been established to focus the efforts of staff in key areas of research interest.

#### New Organisational Structures

The QUT Act has provided stimulus for changes to the committee structure of the institution. The new structure has cut down the size and number of committees.

#### Equal Opportunity Initiatives

Procedures have been developed to address equity problems. A policy document has been produced in draft form and Equal Employment Opportunity criteria now apply to the filling of all new positions.

#### OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

The Dawkins Green and White papers proposed changes for tertiary education, changes that were already in train at QIT. Dawkins pointed to the failure of higher education to face economic realities. The QIT/QUT plan has been seen as a good example of a response to these new economic and educational imperatives.

The attainment of University status in 1989, together with the removal of the institution from under the wing of the Board of Advanced Education, has enabled QUT to make representation on its own behalf. By contrast two factors hinder progress in the institution. For some time now the institution has had difficulty in attracting and keeping gifted academics in a number of fields. Such people are able to command income packages from other institutions and from their industry that are far in excess of existing payroll packages at QUT. In the meantime greater pressure is felt by existing staff in meeting teaching and

research quotas. The award structure for staff has been changed together with the superannuation scheme but this, in itself, has not been enough to attract outstanding new staff.

Secondly, interventive strategies of DEET have resulted in an increase in the administrative duties of all those with managerial responsibilities, though recently some administrative positions were created to deal with these demands.

## THE EXPERIENCES OF THE CHANGES

### THE Experiences of the INNER CIRCLE

There is a unified view within this group about what is driving the changes. Externally, the reorganisation of Higher Education, with an increased emphasis on leaner, more efficient use of resources, is the major factor. The changed external context, following the Green and White Papers, has led to increased demand and decreased resources. There is increased demand for student places and student enrolments have increased dramatically. The Department of Education, Employment and Training has a constant demand for information. The change to University status has required new industrial agreements.

Within the institution, there is agreement that the change to a University was a major step in the progress that has been made in the last five years. The path of progress was not always perceived to be smooth, respondents noting occasions when quite dramatic policy reversals took place. It was felt that the Green and White Papers supported changes at QIT/QUT. It was expressed that QUT has responded to economic and educational imperatives which traditional higher education has failed to face. Initiatives, including action planning, increased emphasis on research, Faculty funding and performance appraisal, are in line with government policies. The demise of BAE, freeing course accreditation, has given more responsibility to the institution. QUT membership of the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, and the creation of Faculties and professorial appointments, have resulted in increased status and respect for the institution and staff in the local, national, and international arenas.

The balance between the traditional emphasis on teaching and consultancy and the new research imperative, represents a major concern.

For the institution, there has been a need to change the management and organisation. Structural and financial reorganisation has allowed Faculties and Departments to take responsibility for the division of resources between teaching, research and consultancy.

Some obstacles to progress were reported. These were the relative salaries of academics and professional colleagues in business, law and industry, the development of initiatives within the current administrative structures and resource provisions.

### The Experiences of the Deans

The Deans have been responsible for the implementation of major changes though they have different emphases on priorities. They are committed

to the mission and the goals of the institution, and translate it in ways which reflect the needs of the clientele of each Faculty. Hence, in some cases, the teaching and consulting relationship between them, their colleagues in the profession and their students, is of the highest priority. The common aim of all is to keep their teaching reputation at the high standard which it has enjoyed.

Research in keeping with the QUT mission statement is another priority high on the list for most of them.

While action planning is supported in terms of the goals of the institution, there is concern about the extra burden for some staff as student numbers increase and staff are expected to do more research. A concern is how to develop the infrastructure to support the new directions, which not only lead to involvement in more research, but also to larger classes and more postgraduate students.

Faculty funding is seen as a positive step for increasing the responsibility of the members of the Faculty. However, internally, the initiation of Faculty funding has introduced an element of competition that was not present previously.

More paper work is generated by the move towards more accountability both to DEET and to internal accountability of staff through Joint Goal Setting and Review. There is the personal dilemma for some between having to manage the Faculty and to be involved in academic activity (time to teach, to do research).

Communication channels are seen to be most important and each Faculty has developed its own system. The aim is to keep all channels open, so people at all levels are informed.

Staffing presents some concerns at all levels. Top personnel are sought but outside professionals are able to earn more and are hard to attract. In some cases it was noted that the quality of applications has risen since University status has been achieved. There is support for staff to improve qualifications and to 'do University things like take sabbatical leave.' Joint Goal Setting and Review, and the performance appraisal system allows for individual staff planning and development, but there is stress on staff as more is expected of them in both teaching and research.

#### The Experiences of the Heads of Schools

Commitment to the QUT Mission is common to the twelve Heads of Schools interviewed. They share the belief that University status, together with the introduction of a corporate management structure and culture, has enhanced perceptions of QUT, is in harmony with its reputation for good teaching, and provides clear directions for future development. Collectively they report the evolution of a University culture which supports a reputation for excellence in teaching and consultancy, and grafts a research imperative onto that traditional emphasis. Schools are expected to encourage their staff in initiating, developing or expanding research endeavours. The delegation of administrative responsibilities and processes are employed by the Heads of Schools to operationalize the new priorities.

The organisational impact of change is keenly manifest and expressed at this point of line management. An escalation of administrative paper work is problematic for Heads of Schools as operational managers of change at QUT. The implications of the increased administrative paperwork may be summarized as follows:

- ~ burgeoning administrative responsibility calls for skills in management and accountancy;
- ~ delegation of paper work is difficult for smaller Schools and Departments, adding to the stress placed upon academic and administrative staff;
- ~ lack of personnel and infrastructural support to assist with administration;
- ~ administrative loads erode effectiveness in other important domains.

The cultivation of research as an emphasised aspect of the new University culture provides a number of significant issues for Heads of Schools. Some respondents were concerned about an absence of infrastructure, personnel and sufficient funds to support expansion in research. Balancing staff teaching, and research schedules, and providing equity in structural rewards for both legitimate academic pursuits, presents a major challenge for Heads of Schools.

An expanding brief was commonly cited. Development of research centres, friend and fund raising, development of postgraduate courses, expansion of consultancies, implementation of flexible teaching and learning strategies and responsive courses, and compliance with administrative responsibilities are all equal expectations placed upon Heads of Schools. Moreover, the Head of School, as the leader, must allay fears of staff suspicious of the implications of change for their professional futures, and foster the improvement of the University profile by supporting the upgrading of professional and academic qualifications. Put simply, the Head of School is instrumental in the maintenance of institutional morale.

Consistent with their place in line management, Heads of Schools report some pressures in defending the traditions of their disciplines and industries in the changing culture of the new University. In this context Heads of Schools represent a buffer between academic staff and the Inner Circle, between a traditional QIT culture and the more expansive ethos of QUT. Politically they experience the tensions between managerial consistency and rationality, on the one hand, and maintaining staff morale and performance on the other.

The Experiences of the Heads of Departments and Principal Lecturers  
There exists within this section of the cohort, significant variations in perceptions of the impact and implications of change at QUT. As operational managers, Heads of Departments have direct experience of the difficulties associated with rapid organisational change; with the expansion of the organisational culture to emphasise research and entrepreneurial initiatives; with the translation of the QUT Mission

into organisational practice, with limited infrastructural support; and with, in some cases, a redefinition of the professional brief of their staff.

This should not be interpreted as chronic resistance to change. The cohort is as one in its support for the change to University status, and its concomitant enhancement of institutional and professional prestige both within and outside of QUT. Differences in how the Heads of Departments and Principal Lecturers perceived change at QUT are not based upon the prerogatives of their disciplines per se, but upon the differential impact of those changes upon Departments and individuals. Without exception Heads of Departments and Principal Lecturers applauded the acquisition of University status, believing it to be directly responsible for an enhanced institutional and individual profile. Outside perceptions of QUT were more positive. This is especially true in the local, interstate and international academic communities. Professorial appointments also assisted in this process of image building.

All supported Faculty funding in its conception. Directly involved in its implementation, some had reservations about its practical administration. Most saw it as a genuine step in the process of devolution of decision making. Others saw it in more cynical terms, suggesting that it simply relocated the contests for funds, relieving Central Administration of some pressure and 'pitting people against each other' in their submissions at departmental level. Moreover, Faculty funding itself did not address the central issue for some of a diminution of resources in the face of expectations for excellence in ever expanding academic and professional domains.

At departmental level the perceived emphasis upon research has been variously received. Some saw it as fundamental academic activity at the heart of their professional interests. Many commented upon the anxiety that people who had been specifically recruited as competent teachers were now experiencing.

Most within this section of the organisation identified significant tensions between the 'talking up' of research devoid of adequate infrastructural and personnel support. This stands as a major issue in the implementation of Inner Circle expectations.

The maintenance of the QUT reputation for good teaching, and the production of sought after graduates, becomes significant in the expansion of research. Expectations for the development of qualitatively sound research and the maintenance of the teaching reputation through the introduction of flexible and responsive teaching programs at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, are seen to be burdensome in the absence of proportional support structures and resources.

The quantum leap in administrative duties delegated to Heads of Departments, Principal Lecturers and academic staff in general was identified as a major concern. In the context of expanding professional expectations, burgeoning administrative paper work represented a diversion or an obstruction. This issue is more significant for Heads

of smaller Departments who have less staff to whom they can delegate. Heads of Departments and Principal Lecturers were inclined to express their concern about problems in communication between senior management and their constituents, and about a perception of isolation from the centre of decision making in the organisation. Indeed some felt excluded by a cabinet style of decision making. This, it was felt, increases alienation within the organisation. Issues such as the appointment of people to managerial positions on the basis of academic rather than managerial experience; difficulties of recruiting in some Departments because of lower salaries; resource problems; and the lack of recognition for performance at levels below Head of Department were also cited as significant.

#### THE ISSUES RAISED IN THE STUDY

While, as indicated earlier, there are differing perceptions of the experiences of senior personnel, several common issues which need further reflection have been raised. These issues are raised as questions.

#### What Should This University Be Like?

Universities at the end of the eighties have an expanded brief, at a time when demands are increasing and resources are diminishing or at least being redirected. Government funding and guidelines, the result of a move towards a market driven economy, are influencing the directions of this and all other Universities. As one participant put it:

"The big structural games of the corporate world are moving into the University world."

How can the competing interests of the corporate world, the government and the academic world be met? QIT/QUT has met the needs of their clients in the world of business, commerce, law, science and technology. The new vision for QUT creates a complex matrix of expectations, demands, and in some cases, conflicting imperatives. That vision describes a more proactive, dynamic, competitive institution, but one in which, at the same time, social responsibility must not be abandoned. Can the features of the corporate culture and the academic culture be balanced in the future development of the University?

#### How Can The Teaching/Research Dilemma Be Resolved?

Teaching is still a major function of the University even though there is an expectation that more research will be undertaken.

All stressed the importance of teaching in the institution, but cited larger classes and increased expectations for staff as having the potential for some change in relation to catering for students' needs. Can those who were hired for their teaching ability and are good teachers add research to their portfolio?

Part of the increased expectation came from the move towards doing more research. However, several times the question of what constitutes good research was raised. ARC grants bring status to the person and the

institution in the University arena. However, more generous funding can be collected from sponsorship, business and commerce. Is there really a distinction between pure and applied research? In some Faculties applied research serves closely the needs of clients, in others there can be more emphasis on pure research. The relative status of research is questioned at the national level, so this is not a debate which is unique to this University.

Within the University, the question of an infrastructure to support the move towards research is one which deserves attention.

#### Are The Procedures For Accountability Working?

Action planning has been designed to assist with long and short term planning.

The extent to which writing of action plans is viewed as successful varies. Those to whom it is successful believe that it has developed the whole institution, has provided a basis for change, introduced change to more research as an integral part of teaching, encouraged more long term planning and accountability of Faculties, Schools and Departments, allowed for more mutual goal setting and provided a set of goals and indicators. It does provide a measure of accountability but the exercise itself is seen by some to be excessive. The staff profile, which is part of action planning, has indicated where qualifications can be updated and publications can be increased. Support must be provided for staff to do these things.

Another aspect of change closely linked to action planning is the Joint Goal Setting and Review which is being implemented to varying degrees. The performance appraisal procedure allows for personal plans for professional and personal development. Some stress attaches to this process, which has introduced formalisation of students evaluation of teaching, peer and committee review of performance. There is a questioning in some quarters of whether such quantification is a reliable performance indicator. Again, this question is not QUT specific, the debate continues, both nationally and internationally, about such processes.

#### What Are The Consequences To Staff When Changes Are Introduced?

At the personal level, nearly all of those interviewed expressed concern at the pressure being felt by all staff. What impact does this have on institutional morale? When change is initiated, stress is unintended but inevitable. What levels of stress are conducive to improved performance?

At the senior level, can personnel be both managers and academics? Do they have the skills, time and support to fulfil the competing demands? What are the mechanisms which can be used to attract good staff? Can loadings be introduced, awards changed? In the case of Equal Employment Opportunity, how can more women be attracted to lecture and study in the Faculties which have been a male domain? How can this be done in the short term? Some Faculties have addressed this problem at School level by informing students of their career possibilities, and some Faculties

are enrolling more women students. However, there is general agreement that more needs to be done in this area.

#### ARE COMMITTEE AND COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES EFFECTIVE?

The leaner committee structure was designed to allow for more efficient decision making in the institution. At the same time control has been put in the hands of fewer people. For some this is satisfactory. For others there is an expressed need to be part of the process.

It was felt that information flow within the organisation was critical to its effective management and to the development of confidence amongst personnel in the processes and substance of decision making. Some characterised the information flowing from the top of the organisation as sometimes ambiguous and sometimes representing major shifts from previous statements without adequate consultation or explanation. It was felt that there should be a smooth flow of information from top to bottom and from bottom to top.

The quantity of 'paper' within the institution was considered problematic. It would seem that management need to ask themselves: How can staff feel included without rendering administration too cumbersome and unworkable? How might communication channels remain open for two-way information flow? How might complex information unambiguously be presented to avoid inaccurate interpretation and unnecessary disquiet? These questions are common to all institutions, and especially so in times of change.

#### CONCLUSION

This study reveals that major changes have taken place over the last five years in QIT/QUT. The institution has not only responded to the changing nature of society, but in a sense, it has 'read' the directions which higher education is taking.

Its accomplishments have resulted in a changed culture. The culture has been built on the traditions of the past. These traditions have included good teaching; responding to the needs of students and the community; having a close relationship with business, industry and law; and having a strong sense of direction and purpose. There is a commitment to continue these traditions, but there is a recognition that, in the new unitary higher education system, new traditions have to be established.

The vision of the new University is that it will be proactive, dynamic, and competitive, but will still be responsive to local and national needs. New traditions being established include a move to more internal and external accountability, more emphasis on research, a shift to a market driven economy, and a different organisational structure. Change in an institution means change in the way individuals think and operate. Such change takes its toll. Personnel in all tertiary institutions will require continued support and understanding if the changes taking place can have a salutary effect for the greatest number of people.

This study represents the first stage in an ongoing research program focussing on the formation of a new University. Further analysis of the data to identify and explore the competing interests of the corporate and University cultures within the current climate of economic rationalism will be pursued.

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1 This paper is an edited version of the Report to the Key Centre in Strategic Management, Queensland University of Technology, "Changing the Culture at QIT/QUT", part of the DEET funded project A Managerial Review of Institutions in the Unitary Higher Education System.



