

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES IN TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION

The changing face of tertiary education

The tertiary education sector in Australia has undergone major change in the last 5 years. At both Commonwealth and State level, Higher Education and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) have experienced a reduction in resources and the imperative to have their educational outcomes more closely linked to the economy.

The Victorian government has completely overhauled its TAFE provision to create a new State Training System which is 'industry driven' and now comprises a range of training providers, both private and public. Central accountability for State funds has been emphasised, and the 31 Colleges of TAFE have consequently experienced a significant diminishing of their earlier autonomous power-base.

Along with the reduction in the training dollar, there has also come the demand for TAFE to provide more training places for industry. Colleges have been required to become actively involved in business development, to both generate income (by encouraging industry or clients to pay) and to respond directly to industries' specific training requirements.

The move to business development, represents a watershed for vocational education in the State. It involves a change of ideology and a significant shift in emphasis in the way TAFE long term educational agendas are set. At the College level there has been a fundamental change in culture and operation. All aspects of the College have been affected - managers, staff, students,

curriculum, procedures, and external relations.

Business development has become the 'leading edge' of College activities, 'pushed' by the central funding authorities, embraced by managers, implemented by staff and undertaken by those in the newly labelled 'training market'. Yet while there has been a lot written on the need for such a change, there has been almost no documentation or reflection on its actual impact. The pace of change has been so frenetic that Colleges have had little time to document or evaluate their new ways of thinking or operating.

Existing literature on similar developments in education overseas alerts us to the fact that this is not uncommon, and also indicates that what research there is, is predominantly written by those pushing a particular ideological position - as either advocates or opponents of the change (Fairweather, 1988). Peck (1983), Byron (1984), Bennet (1983), and O'Brien (1987) discuss the pressures on educational institutions to become entrepreneurial. Louis et al (1989), discuss types of academic entrepreneurialism in American research Universities and Lawrence (1990), documents collaborative financial arrangements between higher education institutions and private sector companies in Australia. Cornwall and Perlman (1990), outline ways to overcome barriers to innovation and entrepreneurship in non-profit organisations and Schuler (1986), Krebs (1985) and Martin (1985) suggest particular strategies for fostering entrepreneurialism.

Savenije and Van Rosmalen (1988), Drucker (1985), and Seymour (1987) examine the difficulties educational institutions face as professional bureaucracies in fostering entrepreneurialism. Richter (1986) and Slaughter (1986) list the benefits to academic institutions arising from University - industry partnerships.

Oliphant (1987) and Mageean (1990) provide the only directly relevant material on business development for the TAFE sector in Australia. Because of the paucity of literature on the research topic it was thought appropriate to use illuminative evaluation as the research method, as its goal is "to enlighten and further the understanding of policy makers, innovators and planners associated with an institution or program." (Meek, 1984:17 and see also Parlett and Hamilton, 1977).

This investigation (which was undertaken as a thesis for a Masters degree in education) was an attempt to illuminate at the 'grass roots' level how the move to business development had been experienced in one TAFE College in Victoria. A case study approach was used to draw on the experience of the six senior TAFE managers in a large urban TAFE College to document their views of the impact of the change on themselves, their staff, their students, and their relationships within and external to

their College.

Two hour taped interviews were conducted with each of six TAFE Divisional managers. A consistent framework was used for each interview but within this, the responses were unstructured. An additional brief questionnaire was administered, and follow up questions were put to managers at a later date where necessary, to round out the data. This was supplemented with a literature survey which examined the new commercial focus of educational institutions.

After describing the College and the scope of its business development, this paper outlines the major themes and raises questions which emerged from the research about the significance of business development; the factors which facilitated its success; the rewarding and self perpetuating nature of the change; the costs associated with business development; new influences on the educational agenda; the tension between the needs of bureaucracy and the pursuit of entrepreneurial goals; and issues for the future.

Background to the College

The research was undertaken in mid 1991. The TAFE College comprised six Divisions covering the broad fields of Sciences, Building, Business, Humanities, and Engineering technologies. In total the Divisions had just over 300 permanent teaching staff and around 100 support staff. The College Council negotiated annually with the State Training Board for its recurrent funding which for 1990 was in the order of 26.4 million dollars. As with the previous two years, this recurrent funding was forecast to be reduced again for 1991 - this time by around a half a million dollars.

An indication of the breadth of the entrepreneurial activity of the TAFE Divisions is given in their projected earnings for 1991 which were estimated to be over \$4 million dollars. All Divisions except one were anticipating earning more than 20% of their total funds

from business development income in 1991. It is significant that the one Division that anticipated a much smaller business income (8%) was the one whose courses had not attracted overseas students.

Four to five years before only two Divisions had a role in earning income and this was considered to be low key 'add-on' activity at the time. The pace of change has thus been dramatic and the shift to business development has been experienced as the most major change all the Divisions have faced in the last five years. Indeed some have seen the move to business development as the greatest change to TAFE since its inception.

The scope of business development

The largest single business activity for the College was the provision of courses for full fee paying overseas students. In 1991 there were 981 students enrolled in the College as a whole and a significant dependence on income from overseas students had been built up in a short period of time with more than 70% of income earned in three Divisions being attributable to overseas students.

The remainder of the Fee for service activities included income from courses or consultancies developed directly for industry or enterprises ; income from training courses which were generally advertised; and income from product development. Clients were individuals, or companies/institutions from local, interstate or international sources.

Examples of the sorts of activities charged for included: small scale manufacturing; writing and sale of textbooks; specially tailored programs for industry in the workplace; short and long courses for industry or which were generally advertised; short courses for the community in continuing and community education (eg. computing, secretarial, marketing, negotiation skills, word-processing etc); litigation consultancy; trade and license testing; specialist consultancy and trouble

shooting for industry; curriculum development and professional development for interstate and international staff.

Some examples of clients at the time included; a range of major petrol companies; local government; Mt. Isa; Telecom; Hawthorn Institute; Victorian and Commonwealth government departments; peak international agencies and interstate industry standards associations.

The significance of business development

Managers responded to the economic crisis which put pressure on them to create more training places, by actively taking up the challenge of business development. All aspects of the Division and indeed the College, underwent change. Managers and most staff adapted to the cultural and organisational impact of these changes. Indeed many embraced the change with enthusiasm once its personal and professional benefits became clear.

Because the move to business development came at a time when the Divisions' finances had been steadily eroding, several Divisions were at their most vulnerable and this made its opportunities and outcomes appear even more dramatic. The motivation of managers to be involved was primarily influenced by the potential to strengthen their Divisions with the additional dollars that business development brought. Where managers had any ideological concerns about the change they were quickly overcome. This was expressed by one manager as:

You come to realise that if we continue with this attitude [that this is wrong to earn money] - what's going to happen is - our funds will diminish, our departments will diminish, we are just going to slowly die. Forget about morals or political views - that is the reality. So you have to assess in your own mind what is wrong - is it wrong to earn money? What are we here for?

Divisions came to have two major areas of operation, their recurrently funded programs and their business development programs and some managers now put their business priorities first. This is a significant change to have occurred in such a short space of time and is reflected in the following comment;

[Previously when dealing] with recurrently funded

programs, and the STB said we want some information by this week and you said - oh . I'll send it back in a couple of weeks - you weren't penalised even if it was two months late. I've taken the view if someone comes through the door with a significant job you really should be able to get back to that person within a week, with a proposal, typed up and

ready for a signature on the bottom line to close the deal.

. We've often had people ring up and they want a proposal that night - so you've really got to be able to drop what you do and respond. . To some extent whilst your recurrently funded courses drift on - if you've got a cash customer at the door you want to focus on that, there and then, and do something.

Factors which have facilitated business development success

There are a number of factors which taken together appear to have facilitated successful growth in business development activities. These included:

- * A prehistory of business development fee for service activity from five years before - even if not 'substantial'. One Division was turning over \$50,000 a year at this time and another had employed a 'marketer';
- * Early realisation, acceptance and active pursuit of fee for service activity by the manager with strong energetic involvement in encouraging initiative and ensuring systematic management;
- * A high degree of autonomy for the manager from external interference in decisions about the attraction and dispersal of funds;
- * Readiness of the manager to stick by basic accountability procedures (finance and award guidelines) and negotiate and 'deal' forcefully on anything that is not strictly proscribed;
- * Minimal ideological resistance to the change to 'earning money' by heads of departments and Division staff;
- * An acceptance by staff of a climate of change leading to increased flexibility;
- * Broad recognition of the availability of substantial rewards for all staff both monetarily and 'in kind';
- * Key 'change agent' staff either internal or coming in on contract whose attitudes and successes influenced other staff.

- * A person employed specifically to market fee for service activity, find work for the Division and assist with implementation. (Not always full-time - not always consistently - but definitely 'there');
- * A ready market for fee for service activities.
- * Well understood systematic business planning mechanisms (not necessarily written down - but regularly discussed and reviewed) by a management group;
- * Principles, guidelines and systems in place for ensuring that staff capacity is available to make rapid professional responses to enquiries;
- * Having enough money to make money. Resource availability which enabled more staff to go to conferences or seminars led to more contacts and more income opportunities. Other surplus resources enabled risk taking initiatives to be piloted.

The size of the Division not surprisingly had an impact on the growth of fee for service activities. The two largest Divisions had the greatest spread of activities and largest income source from fee for service. This was not however the case for income derived from overseas students where the size of income received was more relevant to market demand rather than Division size.

The rewarding and self-perpetuating nature of the change

Managers found it easy to speak of the rewards of business development. Where they were successful, managers and staff gained personally, financially and most importantly, professionally. Their training and professional development as educators, places high value on notions of autonomy and control, and business development returned and enhanced this control and extended their scope of influence as the following comment demonstrates;

Often the person that delivers the program has had a lot to do with working up the program. They've often been the person that's talked to the client and so they've had a lot of control, really with what finally comes out. Whereas you contrast this with

recurrently funded programs where someone sends you a syllabus, where you use a reference book that someone else has produced, prepare students for an exam that someone else produces. You can have 100% control over what you're doing from beginning to end. I think that puts the professional in control. That's very important.

Their Divisions were now seen as exciting places to work in, with new resources and equipment and improved and enlarged staffing profiles.

[Staff] - are prepared to accept the challenges - Its got an awful lot to do with success. They've seen their mates enter, they've seen them be successful - so in other words if you want to be successful in my Division you get involved in these things . so there's a whole lot of personal

credibility and that becomes a driving force in its own right.

These managers readily evinced many of the qualities Tropman (1989) lists as characteristic of entrepreneurial leaders. They were excited and challenged by the change, they thrived on independence and autonomy, they were quite prepared to take risks (calculated), were self starting and had a low need for support. But what happens when managers do not have, or are not able to acquire these qualities and are not able to perform? There are a large number of managers across the State Training System, some of whom may find they are not suited to these new approaches.

The rewards of their new job role were also so good that three managers volunteered that they would be uninterested in seeking promotion. This may have implications for College and system succession planning. A related issue raised by Kanter (1986) is that of equal opportunity for managers. The demands of the position of increased time and availability resulting from business development, may conflict with domestic requirements of female managers and thus inhibit equal opportunity goals for institutions.

Unlike their corporate partners, the (now) TAFE Executive Service provides a permanency and security of position for managers. These managers are now operating

sizeable businesses (utilising the State's resources) without the comparable personal risk that managers of corporate enterprises would have. One manager was sufficiently confident to suggest his Division could move gradually to the position of being completely self funding. For most though, there would be little incentive to make this change whilst they can have the excitement of business development without the full risk.

Managers believed that business development had also led to gains for students in access to the higher quality teaching and resources that fee for service income allowed. Once in the College students appeared to be considered equally, regardless of whether they came as a result of business development or as recurrently funded students. The situation can arise though, where students may not feel they are being treated fairly, as it will be possible to have students in the same class paying different amounts and receiving different certificates.

As with the business world they are modelling, there

seems little reason for Divisions to stem any further growth of business activities as long as the market is prepared to pay. It has in effect become a self-perpetuating activity.

The costs associated with business development

Offsetting the rewards, are the costs and potential costs of business development (which were not always so obvious). There were perceived losses in overall staff and student amenities as pressure on classroom accommodation increased. Divisions had experienced a climate where class accommodation problems had only just been able to be kept in check because of declining recurrent enrolments. The Commonwealth is now funding more places for students in recurrent programs, which will bring the accommodation problem to a head. If there are no new capital funds available, will Divisions want to take up new recurrently funded students if they take up valuable space which could be used for fee paying students? One manager indicated how a shift in priorities could take place;

It's not a deliberate act [to substitute fee for service for recurrent programs] but every time the

government says it's going to reduce your recurrent budget - one of the things you can do is say 'How can we increase our efficiency?' That's one thing - now I've done that - we did that five years ago - and I've got tired of that. - and now I say 'Every time the recurrent budget's cut - fine. 5% is cut - 5% of classes disappear 5% of fee for service comes in and you make more money out of it'.

Thus the government agenda and the Division agenda may well now be different. How will new accommodation needs be prioritised? Will new facilities be built for fee paying courses to ensure a quick response to industries' current needs but which may have little longer term relevance? Will these facilities also emphasise classroom space and neglect the wider student amenities which help "to promote the dignity worth and joy of learning." (Pattison, 1988: 121).

Another major change that business development has

brought is the concept of financial 'risk' to education. With a core of permanent staffing, a gradual reduction in recurrent funds and a growth in contract staff, there is the potential to be subsidising an increasing number of permanent staff with business development funds. One manager explained:

The recurrent programs have been cut back to be able to support . 70% of permanent staff and the other 30% are being supported by fee for service. And that is a real problem. It's the sort of thing - where I think a manager gets grey hair very rapidly and thinks about retirement every time the Prime Minister [says]- 'We don't want to talk to Malaysia - or anywhere else' - It really is a serious worry .I never felt responsible for staff the way I do now. It's a new form of stress.The first kick is - gee the money's coming in - gosh look at all the things I can do - after that wave's gone - I think - I've put on all these staff - they've got families, they've got kids. They're expecting their contracts to go on. I'm not real happy about making chalk and cheese of permanent and contract staff.

Resources, accommodation and infrastructure services within the Institute are also now partly underpinned by business income. If the funds disappear the salary bills

will still be there. If recurrent funds increase, the problem may be alleviated in the short term but in the long term the instability is being built right into the fabric of the organisation. Yet there is no guarantee that overseas students or industry will continue to provide the training market and profits which Divisions and the College have now come to depend on.

Managers recounted examples where some staff had been significantly affected when they had not been able to adapt to the change in the Division and had effectively been disenfranchised. As well, College and individual staff members have sometimes been in direct and quite serious (legal) conflict of interest when staff used their new skills to set up consultancies in their own

time which competed with the College. Staff were also receiving widely different amounts for their fee for service work and some had come to depend on this extra income. How well does the notion of staff pursuing their own personal short term gains, fit with the notion of an educational institution existing for the long term social gains of the State? If individuals become unhappy with their relative levels of reward, will they continue to cooperate with managers in undertaking fee for service activities? Staff are now also more reliant on the benevolence, wisdom and success of the manager who is now operating in a job role for which he/she was not initially recruited.

Without in any way referring personally to the six managers interviewed, it is clear that the current level of autonomy and independence of managers can lead to the situation where managers use their increased freedom to build profits, but in so doing have the potential to act in rather maverick and Machiavellian ways. The checks and balances imposed when managing recurrent funds (eg. union negotiations, accreditation, and agreed staff reward systems) are no longer there.

They have a very free hand in the business area, and whilst this may well lead to beneficial outcomes for all, it may not. The credibility of Divisions, Colleges and the system could now be put at risk by misguided business management of some with this level of autonomy. Large failures happen in the business world, and can potentially happen somewhere across 31 Colleges. The

degree to which College Councils are aware of and confront these new and significant underlying risks to their operations, is largely unknown and undebated.

New influences on the educational agenda

The greater influence of industry on the State Training System means the setting of the educational agenda appears to have become more instrumental and utilitarian. This is not without its benefits. Managers were quite clear that their overall relationships with industry have improved as a result of Fee for Service activity. They believe that industry perceives their divisions as being more vibrant, energetic, and more flexibly able to meet their immediate training demands. TAFE has been much criticised by industry in the past for failing to do this. However, while Divisions are in the position of 'chasing dollars' from wherever the market will pay, there is a risk that it is the very short-term needs of industry that will hold sway and educational balance within the curriculum will take a lower priority.

The issue of the quality of teaching and learning for students in the short and long term, raised by the shift to the more functional emphasis of training for skills, and fuelled by fee for service courses reacting to businesses' immediate needs, has not been widely

examined or debated in the system. These managers were clearly aware and concerned about the shift occurring in the educational balance of their courses. Questions were raised by managers about how representative 'industry' is and how well industry can identify its needs. However it is quite difficult to find the incentive or the means to confront and debate changes which have been so rapidly imposed that they have almost become 'givens' overnight. In the current culture the notion of 'industry driven' is almost unassailable.

Managers spoke of the change within, and between Divisions and Colleges to a much more competitive business orientation, rather than collaborative educational approach in the search for fee service markets, for example one manager stated:

When I find out what's been quoted on the job [of

another College] I do it so I can shaft them next time round when I can - That's private enterprise.

and another said:

We're really quite secretive about what we do. We certainly don't tell other Colleges. We're always trying to get the jump on them by continually introducing new programs. We copyright all our material. If I catch other Colleges using it we'll take legal action in a flash. When you get into these commercial activities - you're either in it or you're not. I can see the time will come when this will be an issue. It's made us very secretive. We'll do everything we can to beat the other Colleges. It's really very competitive. This notion of sharing on a state-wide basis is really under attack in that system . That is a real disadvantage.

For those who are the winners in the competition there are clear short term benefits. However, among Colleges there will be those who do not have the markets, skills or financial reserves to ensure their College growth. How then will questions of equitable access for students to quality courses across the State be resolved, if it is success in business development that determines the strength of a College? It may too, in the long term, damage the notion of a professional collegiate, building and openly sharing a body of knowledge about vocational education.

The accreditation of private providers of vocational education will even further reinforce this competition, allied to the concept of a training market that now buys its services from the best priced (whilst not

necessarily the best quality) provider.

The tension between the needs of bureaucracy and the pursuit of entrepreneurial goals

In a large College such as this one, it would be difficult for the Directorate to keep 'tabs' on the activities of all their managers. This College does not, and this has enhanced the Divisional managers freedom to operate flexibility and creatively to build their business development income. Minimal intervention and regulation from within the Institute has clearly been a precondition for success as it has

allowed control of business development to be devolved easily to managers and often right down to those staff negotiating and delivering programs.

However managers did experience a tension between the bureaucratic controls of the centre (STB) and the business needs of the Division. Managers evinced significant disdain for what they saw as "central career bureaucrats" and described their actions as either ineffectual or irrelevant to the real way their Divisions operated. Whilst they were prepared to tolerate the compliance requirements of the central authority in regard to recurrent funding, they were seriously concerned about the potential for the STB to impose restrictive guidelines and procedures on business development. Working with a centralised TAFE Teaching Service (TTS) was seen as entirely incompatible with business development goals and all managers expressed a concern that "if we earn money they'll deduct it from our recurrent funds - so we'll actually be square."

Managers' sensitivity to concerns about possibly being regulated and controlled in their business activities reflected the ultimate tension between bureaucratic and

business agendas. In effect these managers are operating as virtually free agents in a system in which they are not. This continued vulnerability to potential external control, may on the one hand deter them from being fully accountable, or alternatively, prevent them taking wise business decisions, paradoxically increasing the financial risks which already exist.

Yet running a business operation within a secure, publicly funded bureaucracy is clearly possible and effective when there is flexibility, autonomy and a market which is willing to pay. The very constraints of bureaucracy, of control from the centre, significant requirements for data and reporting, and accountability to system wide guidelines, makes the freedom and excitement of business development even more attractive. As one manager said:

The heads of department have come from a position of seeing themselves as running a publicly funded organisation to one where they generate funds for which they then have responsibility to expend them in the way they see fit. They've got more control over what they do than previously. Whereas there was

a great body of rules and regulations and accountabilities that were required - Now that they can do that - still with accountability - I don't think that's diminished - but its more satisfying to be able to spend moneys that you've generated - than moneys that have been given to you on a grant basis.

The more involved managers become in business development the more they give it priority. As managers and their Divisions become more like businesses how will the issues involved in their own appointments be addressed? What should be their remuneration and accountability for the risks they take? Will newly appointed managers be required to have educational or business backgrounds?

The future

Managers have been enthusiastic about the benefits of business development for themselves, their Divisions, staff and students, yet still aware of the constraints and boundaries they face. Business development reflects aspects of business - competition, risk, rewards for the individual and the possibility (but not certainty) of significant outcomes.

This study has shown that there are significant short term benefits for TAFE resulting from the move to business development and that these benefits have been infused right into the fabric of the organization. Individual beliefs have been challenged and personal rewards have been spread across management staff and students. The climate for continuing on the path of business development is highly favourable as its benefits are so obvious. However the costs and potential costs of this development have also been noted, and whilst they are not as overt as the benefits they may nonetheless prove to have a substantial influence in the longer term.

Our old concept of educational institutions as enduring, low risk, stable repositories of knowledge, freely available to be shared with students as a right, for the

long term good of the country is rapidly passing. Each College will need to decide how much to embrace this

change, how far to move on the continuum of business development and how to manage its impact.

The lessons from this study show that it will be in the interests of the TAFE sector and the community to not only manage today's change well, but to also put in place mechanisms for encouraging reflection on how this change will contribute in the long term to the certainty of quality broad based educational outcomes from TAFE.

This will not be easy, because the pace of change and its substantial short term rewards effectively discourage debate and so partially mask any longer term problems which may, it could be argued, never eventuate.

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