

One of the things I do in my day job is to do ‘futures scanning’ – at least that is our shorthand term for the activity. We try to identify issues of current concern and how those issues might develop over time; we try to identify emerging issues which we may not have even thought about yet, and we try to bring that information back into Swinburne in ways that are useful. One of the projects we are working on at the moment is on the 21st Century University.

Now, this is a topic that has had a lot written about it over the past few years. Many papers and publications refer to the ‘transformation’ of universities, particularly in terms of changes to academic work, changes to learning and teaching delivery, and changes to university management.

As we pondered how to approach the task, one of the issues that came up was the role staff would play in any ‘transformed’ university. The role of academic staff as the interface between students and the university has been researched, and there is a fair bit of stuff about how universities as organizations might need to be managed – and most of this seems to acknowledge that a blend of collegial and managerialism approaches will be needed for the future.

The exact shape and form of university management is not known, and nor can it be. But there are tools and techniques now that let you think about the future in more systematic ways, and which let you tap into the tacit knowledge held in the heads of people who now manage universities. It is difficult nowadays for busy people to free up some time in their schedules to think strategically across a group of people – as opposed to individuals thinking strategically, which most of us do all the time. But the need to think strategically about the future, and the need to start building strategies for the long-term – beyond the 3-5 year time horizons of most documented plans – is becoming more and more critical.

Futures scanning attempts to provide the context for this sort of thinking. When you start to think about how universities might need to be managed in the future, a couple of things spring to mind immediately: one is that universities are unique, and that we need to spend some time articulating better than we do now, just what it is that makes them and their management unique, so that we know what it is we must protect into the future. Two is that managing universities today is very different to what it was 30 years ago, and is likely to be at least as different 30 years into the future – in ways that we probably have not even begun to consider.

Universities and their staff need to find the time to think about how to re-organise their structures and processes to suit the emerging 21st Century University. It is not a matter of tweaking the existing model; it really is a matter of re-thinking the model from the ground up. The thinking needs to occur in individual brains, in universities and at the sector level. And the thinking needs to be informed by some new tools and methodologies, so that we do not fall prey to outdated worldviews and unhelpful assumptions about how the world should be.

For example, we now have the situation where academics and administrators are both involved in university management, but the roles are fuzzy, the boundaries blurring and the tension growing. Both groups of staff have particular skills and knowledge to bring to the university management task. It would seem eminently more sensible to

spend our energy working out how the university can best utilize the skills and knowledge of all its management staff rather than trying to maintain a structure and system which, by all accounts, will be a hindrance in the future. If you listen to the conversation that is going on about this now, you will hear and read comments about how – basically – administrators need to remember that their place in the hierarchy is a few rungs lower than academics, no matter what expertise they hold, and what contribution they might be able to make. Whenever I make a comment like this, I have to qualify it by saying that it is a generalization, and that individual academics and administrators have excellent working relationships.

But...until we think about the future of university management without these sorts of attitudes and assumptions, we are not going to be able to come up with a new model that will strengthen the university's chances of maintaining its status as a primary knowledge organization. I do not think there is any argument that the university needs a different management model, but I do think there is little consensus about what that model should be.

Using futures scanning and futures techniques provides a process that takes into account existing worldviews and assumptions and harnesses them to create a new vision of what could be – not what will be, since the future is unknowable, and we cannot predict how it will turn out. We can, however, think about, and prepare for, what might be. The advantage of these processes are that they are inclusive and participative, and use the insights and experience of staff to develop the views of the future. Rather than having a view of the future imposed, using futures techniques allows a shared and hopefully 'owned' view of the future to emerge.

But, it all takes time and a fair bit of effort. These are not new processes or techniques. Businesses have used them for many years, as have governments all over the world. And while there are many business models and techniques that universities should definitely not adopt, futures approaches are not in this category. Anything that helps the university as an organization prepare for an uncertain future should be considered, and not dismissed as a fad because it doesn't fit the current idea of what strategic planning is. Using the management example again, consider what sorts of solutions might be developed if the current idea that only academics can manage universities is no longer considered valid. Lots of other issues are immediately identified that would need to be addressed – like ensuring that whoever did manage universities understood that universities were unique organizations and required a particular management approach. That sort of understanding has to underpin management, but it does not require an appointment as an academic.

Futures approaches help identify what is important in our current thinking and what is not, what is certain about the future and what is not, and what needs attention and what can wait. People will argue that they know how to think in this way already, but almost invariably, once a futures process has been experienced, the responses of those people will be that they have learned a new way of seeing the same old thing which has enhanced the way they think about the future. If we can design a new university management model using these techniques then we should find the time.