

# **Strategic and Tactical Planning in Higher Education: an Overview of Theory and Issues, with Emphasis upon Research Planning**

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*Discussion on strategic and tactical planning, throughout the last two decades, has not yet, in all cases, fulfilled the promise of complexities set down by early theorists. Early literature sets out the conceptual field as complex and multi-layered. Although planning outlines proposals for outcomes, it also needs to reflect the organisational structure that brings those planning details into view. While the units of planning may range across a variety of forms and types, questions arise about which of those may be emphasised in the planning process. Under organisation of the planning process, the following ideas governed the earlier discussion of strategic and tactical planning: comprehensiveness tied to elemental emphasis, integration/ fragmentation, flexibility, organisational penetration, analytical sophistication and structure of the planning group (Peterson, 1980). Against this background we now need to ask about the nature of planning outcomes and the organisation of the planning process in current settings. How has development proceeded? What progress is evident that implements ideas given by the earlier theorists? Which current theorists contribute to this implementation? This paper gives a short analytical history of developments in the field, then goes on to discuss passages from planning documents that highlight points of analysis.*

Discussion and practice of planning in higher education has not yet sufficiently built upon foundations set down in the literature of early theory. Although a number of later sources reflect due complexity under the strategic planning topic, we need to ask whether this development has emphasised strategy at the expense of tactics. Originally, discussion began by clarifying the term planning. Strategy and tactics were then tagged and made plain within the broader field of planning. This paper argues that an unfortunate distortion has developed, probably through national imperatives to get on and produce documents across institutions. The terms strategy and strategic seem to have unduly biased the direction of thought. Tactical dimensions or internal focus have tended to go unmentioned. We need to ask whether the many plans that we read and inquire into today reflect such a tendency, and then go on to ask how a conceptual balance may be restored to the overall picture. This paper begins with an outline of the early ideas, raises some questions about how they are basically problematic, considers some later treatments of the field, then looks at some examples of planning documents, and makes some recommendations for restoring discussion to encompass the original complexities identified in the field.

Before the paper proceeds, a point needs to be made about the changing theoretical climate of the earlier times. Within sociological perspectives on higher education institutions and their functions, influences from structuration theory have emerged over the previous three decades. A review of the literature for the year nineteen-eighty indicates a turning point period. In philosophy of social research, the idea of "truth as a negotiated agreement between social scientists and those they study" was published (Bauman, Z. 1978 p. 234; Giddens, A. 1976; Hughes, J. 1980, pp. 126-7). Educational research theory was also taking up this idea that social science did not stand in a "subject-object relation", but a "subject-subject relation to its 'field of study'" (Cohen, L. *et al.* 1980, p. 23; Giddens, A. 1976). By contrast, within the politics of public policy field, a last gasp for positivism emerged. Scenario writing, it was argued, gave new hope for program managers needing to "think about what types of games should be played, who should be the players, and what should be the stakes" (Bardach, E. 1980, p. 254). This was the "them versus us" or "subject-object" outlook writ large, and argued in detail. In contrast to this again, a clarion call was being made to subject higher education to systematic sociological study. A need for adequate planning emerged as "the sector's capacity for survival" was being considered. Researchers saw survival as based upon a "clear understanding of both its structure and manner of functioning"; and that "such an understanding might well suggest strategies of defence for the survival of the institutional sector of higher education" (Gross, E. *et al.* 1981, p. 4). Today, within organisational analysis generally, a literature scan reveals wide adoption of structuration theory as a way of understanding a range of organisational processes, including planning (Bloodgood, J. *et al.* 2000; Borg, K. 1999; Riehl, C. J. 2000; Willmot, R. 1999). Part of the work in this paper is to try to show how the application of structuration theory may enhance the development of a clear purpose and agenda for institutional planning and related research.

### **Early Views of Planning**

It needs to be outlined how Peterson *et al* sets down a detailed and complex picture of planning (Jedamus, P. *et al.* 1980; Peterson, M. 1980). Three aspects of the framework will be discussed in this paper: planning process based upon critical questions that institutions can

and should ask themselves; the wide range of basic planning unit types identified for institutions; and the six related organising concepts for the planning process itself.

**Critical Questions.** Emphasising dynamic process over static compilation, Peterson *et al* assert that colleges and universities “need to place their primary emphasis on the pattern of activities and relationships among individuals involved in planning” (Peterson, M. 1980 p. 115). Structure and techniques are seen as “parts of the process” not “independent of the process”. Strategic planning elements are distinguished from tactical elements. Critical questions, not strict methodological guidelines, drive the planning process.

Which are to be developed under strategic planning: environmental assessment, institutional assessment, values assessment, or master planning?

Which are to be developed under tactical planning: program planning, priority setting, resource allocation or program review?

Critical questions do not end there. In respect of both *strategic* and *tactical* planning: how is each element to be organised? How is each element to be *structured* in terms of purpose, structure or model of planning, analytical approach, issues? The conclusion to the article gives a long list of “critical questions an institution can or should ask itself in designing a planning process” (Peterson, M. 1980, pp. 160-1). There are close to fifty questions, ranging across the rationale for planning, the overall design of the planning process, strategic and tactical planning elements, and overall organisation.

Clearly, this use of key questions strengthens the overall approach advocated by Peterson *et al*. Critical questions are designed to lead practitioners onwards along an ever-deepening pathway into the complexities of their own institution. This approach matches repeated calls for institutions to base planning upon their own unique histories, established talents and values orientations. Identify those areas you have been good at and develop those further. It also answers criticisms that environmental control is not easily available to institutions setting out to plan strategically. This last point warrants further comment.

Maassen *et al* gives a detailed analysis of how well established views on the organisational fragmentation, diffuse decision-making power, “grassroots” character of innovations, and the limited authority at the administrative level, prevent planners from building up “complete and certain” knowledge about their own organisation (Maassen, P. *et al*. 1992, p. 1490). Somewhat pessimistically, this leads to an inherent inability to have “firm control over their environment or the organisation itself”. This idea is seductive: that planning equates with control, and lack of planning equates with lack of control. To counter this point of view, what is needed, in this context, is a range of empirical examples to show how Peterson’s critical questions can lead to planning clarity, with clear benefits to the institution, without a rush to control of ideas and outcomes whether inside or outside the institution. To achieve these kinds of planning insights, outcomes would need to show how the institution was finally balancing its planning *comprehensiveness* tied to *elemental emphasis* and *flexibility*, among other things (Peterson, M. 1980, pp. 124-7).

Along with Peterson *et al*, we need to ask whether the plans we read and research are an outcome of the systematic application of such questions as the following:

- a. How is the overall planning process currently being organised in relation to the larger institutional context?

and

- b. How does the planning staff develop methods to meet its needs for *communication about planning* and *education about planning*?

One research participant from a university in the State of Victoria has given clear initial answers to these two questions (a Manager – Planning and Review – Office of the Vice Chancellor).

The canvas is never blank; there is no green field starting point. Linearity in planning stultifies dynamism. A more appropriate idea is parallel processing. Keep an eye on the interactions between things. This services the dynamics. Watch the specific and the general, aim for coherence between these, chock up the gains, and develop a view of where you are going.

In reply to question a. two options are currently being considered, evidenced in the interview notes:

Take the planning unit and nest it within an appropriate Faculty or Department, or attach it to the Office of the Vice Chancellor. The latter option looks like being favored. The Chief Executive Officer drives strategy, and this stimulates the academic heartland, providing a strong steering core (Burton Clark). The Vice Chancellor needs strong strategic advice.

In reply to question b. it was affirmed that this question was very big and constantly on the mind. It was stated that planners can “get on a bus” that leaves the bus stop and the rest of the university behind. The unit is setting out to find answers to the need for communication with and education of the rest of the university. It suggests a fertile ground for further interview research.

Such sorts of replies take the discussion well beyond issues of incompleteness in “control of the planning object” affirmed in Maassen *et al* (p. 1490). Peterson’s critical questions, two decades later, still bite deep in interviews. Participants affirm how such sorts of questions were never asked in common talk a decade ago. Yet today, they appear undeniably significant. Significance seems to reside in the idea that it is the process of planning, rather than the outcomes of planning, that we need to elevate to the first rank of importance. It is not the documents that matter so much as the organisation. Relations between planning groups, individuals, ideas and programs need constant clarification and outline. The planning and institutional research agenda becomes clearer, as also does the social research agenda on the topic itself.

**Basic Planning Unit Types.** Six types of basic planning units are identified for analysis by researchers inquiring into the organisational planning processes. While it is said that these may not always be clearly distinguished, “there is often a tendency to stress one” (Peterson, M. 1980, p. 117). Stress may rest upon “the formal rational, natural-human groups, belief

systems, tasks and techniques, interest groups, or autonomous professional units” (Peterson, M. 1980, p. 117). At this point, research matters become very interesting. Frequently emphasising offices, office holders, programs and related budget items, plans can be seen to be mainly focused upon the formal-rational dimensions of an institution. Speaking anecdotally, this is often the case at the departmental end of the university community.

Implied in Peterson’s range of planning unit types lies an agenda of information gathering that is lengthy indeed. The natural-human groups, belief systems, and coalitions of experts range widely in universities and are manifold. Belief systems cut across disciplines, natural-human groups develop around all sorts of connections built up over time, from common alumni to shared incidental project work to accidental acquaintance through proximity of neighbourhood housing. Expertise rises and falls with the coming and going of tasks and their task-force groupings. This suggests that both planners and the academics and administrators they serve need to venture more deeply into these sorts of areas. They need to be more active in gathering local information pertinent to the development of *tactics* that can then lead to clearer *strategy*. There is much work still not done by planners in this regard. Seen this way, the planning time horizon now stretches over many years, or even a decade or two.

To illustrate how planning may probe across a range of Peterson’s planning unit types, a short selected list of items from a report on strategic planning given by Harman and Harman is listed below. The items are taken from the workshop records of Group Session 1: listing Strengths, Capabilities and Opportunities for the University (Harman, G. *et al.* 1998, pp. 4-67).

Under *Strengths*:

- Linkages with outside institutions and good external donors.
- Community involvement/ international involvement.
- Networks within country.
- Flexibility to develop, to manipulate, to add, to suspend programs independently.
- Strong reactive capability to react to budget cuts.

Under *Capabilities*:

- Social responsibilities.
- Advocate for marginalised groups in society/ human rights.
- Adaptability of staff and programs.

Under *Opportunities*:

- Academic freedom which gives opportunities for expression of views.
- Autonomy of the University to operate independently.
- Church bodies and the like.

These items appear embedded in the *non*-formal-rational dimensions of the university. They take in the other five aspects given by Peterson: natural-human group concerns (marginalised groups), belief systems (Church), task groups (flexibility), interest groups (social responsibilities) and autonomous individuals and groups (adaptable staff and programs). Further inquiry is warranted into the background that produced items such as these. Both planning

practitioners and researchers of planning need to probe the relational dynamics that lie behind them. They need to build a process that will cyclically call upon such sources of concern. It is out of this *tactical* groundwork that a more realistic conception of *strategy* can emerge. Moreover, it seems much more in line with structuration theory as a device for understanding and managing the structural change that lies ahead for the university if it is to be able to move towards a more strategic relationship with its setting. Facing up to a new technology of planning, how are rules and resources seen to be used by practitioners and researchers, to both perpetuate and transform structural arrangements and forces at work in the system (Borg, K. 1999; Giddens, A. 1976;1984)?

Contrast this picture with that of Cope, who asserts that “the methodology of the strategic planning model is not complex” (Cope, R. 1992, p. 1428). Just begin by reexamining the stated mission and follow this up with a scan of the environment for typical opportunities and threats. Then study the “roles and moves” of the competitors. Formulate a vision of a better position for the institution, including “appropriate programs, means of delivery, pricing, and means of promotion” (p.1428). Produce a plan to deploy the resources. Such a point of view suggests that the dark shadow of boredom will soon settle upon the retreats and meetings gathered to do the work. Some resolution of this gap in perceived complexities of the planning process in higher education is now required.

**Six Related Planning Process Concepts.** There are six key concepts in planning process: comprehensiveness tied to elemental emphasis, integration/ fragmentation, flexibility, penetration, analytical sophistication, and planning group structure. Much of this terminology is self-explanatory. Comprehensiveness tied to elemental emphasis has already been briefly examined in this paper. Increased comprehensiveness means a wider coverage of the planning elements. Since a complete coverage of all elements will use more resources, a law of diminishing returns may well set in for the university if it pursues thoroughgoing comprehensiveness. A point may be made here in respect of the RMIT University Strategic Plan. Under a series of **Broad Divisional Plans**, those for the Research and Development Division link *research* objectives and strategies with *innovation* objectives and strategies; and on to *community service* objectives and strategies (RMIT 1998, pp. 14-15). Three research objectives for the innovation component are listed as follows:

- \* to encourage individuals and teams to pursue innovative activities which link research and learning to industrial and community relevant problems
- \* to encourage individuals and teams to pursue consultancies as a means of obtaining and retaining industry and community relevant skills
- \* to enrich the University’s educational curriculum, in particular its vocationally oriented content, through an expanded program of applied research and successful innovation including partnerships with participants in the RMIT Technology Estate.

The objectives are worth listing because, while each is a valuable point, in its own right, each needs to be opened up, in some textual way, so that a reader of this document can see how it targets a range of planning unit types and incorporates a range of planning process concepts. This would be seen to contribute to the plan’s innovatory spirit at this point. Eight strategies follow this list, but they use terminology of the kind that enumerates worthwhile outcomes, rather than identifies points of organisational flux that are typical for the institution.

RMIT will: contribute ... to solutions; build partnerships ... with clients; pursue ... consultancy services; develop mechanisms for staff placements; formally recognise ... staff awards program; provide opportunities ... to work in industry and off campus; expand and protect ... educational services and materials; expand and protect ... through quality intellectual property processes that benefit all. In many ways the document is one of the best of its kind: a detailed and thoroughgoing focus upon desirable outcomes. But it remains a long way from explicitly spelling out a new process for cyclical renewal of the planning items within the institutional field it seeks to change.

Peterson's view of organisational penetration asks whether the programs and plans are being implemented well across among the faculties and departments. Planning needs to be accepted "beyond the upper administrative echelons" (Peterson, M. 1980, p.126). This amounts to a somewhat restricted concept within the framework being put forward. A more dynamic process might extend the idea to include the process of planning itself. To what extent do staff and students in these centres consciously carry out the planning themselves, at least from time to time? Anderson *et al* significantly reports widespread use of retreat-based strategic planning, frequently initiated by Vice Chancellors themselves, but then carried on by invited "senior and mid-level academic and general administrators" (Anderson, D. *et al.* 1999, p. 25). Although an "iterative process" can get under way, with retreat participants as go-betweens in the implementation process, there remains no guarantee of universal acceptance of the plan through such mechanisms. Significantly deep organisational penetration would seem to be the only guarantee of universal acceptance.

A comprehensive and detailed comparison of all research planning documents is too large a task for a paper of this size. But some useful points of comparison may now be made across some of the research plans that institutions present on the Internet and elsewhere. Deakin University has a Code of Good Practice in Research and a Code of Good Practice in Supervision of Higher Degrees by Research (Deakin University 1998a; 1998b). Each document covers six pages of detailed text, and the research document covers such topics as data gathering, storage and retention, authorship, publication, conflict of interest, misconduct, misappropriation, interference, misrepresentation and responsibilities under the code. Clearly, the document sets out to control some the tricky situations that can arise within research. Ballarat University, by contrast, under Focus Area 3: Research, Consultancy and Partnerships, presents three groups of six short points under Core Elements, Key Strategies, and Performance Indicators (Ballarat 2000, p. 8). This covers only two-thirds of a page. The following passage is taken from interview notes made on the Ballarat campus:

We must not disappear into mountains of data and mountains of paper. You must let the units and schools get on with the business. There are two poles of activity: on the one hand, planning, checklisting, timelines and dates; on the other hand, the units need to seriously think about what they are doing and where they are going. The tension between these two poles must be resolved.

In answering questions about the usefulness of the plan, three points were made. The plan has articulated the need to focus upon research as a core element, it reflects the importance given to research within the overall context of the Statement of Strategic Intent, and it is an example of parallel processing. This means that we are not writing upon an empty slate. We

are taking what is there already and setting out to process it into something that is more clearly in the direction we now wish to proceed. Concerning benchmarking, it was critically stated that turning benchmarks into targets required much work, for “indicators are not targets, and the Devil is in the targets (McKinnon, K. *et al.* 2000, pp. 99-114). What targets are reasonable for us? Will they stand up to scrutiny? This process will reshape Focus Area 3 of University Goals.” The Ballarat document, in its economical layout and language texture (non-judgmental, open-ended) seems to confirm a process approach, in Peterson’s terms.

A different approach again is illustrated in parts of the University of Melbourne documents (Melbourne University 1998; 1998; 2000). In the Strategic Plan Perspective (1998), six points are listed that affirm what “research intensive universities should encourage the Commonwealth to [do]”. Terminology includes acknowledge ..., recognise ... , accept ... , endorse ... , and entrench ... . The Operational Plan, Section Two, Enhancing Research Performance, has one goal, nine strategies and ten targets. Once again, as in the RMIT University document noted above, desirable outcomes are stressed, and a process of planning is not clearly indicated or suggested. This resides in the Ensuring Accountability document. Both textually and graphically, this document focuses closely upon the internal processes of the University. Here we can see the tactical dimension of planning given lengthy and detailed treatment. Natural human groups, belief systems, tasks and techniques, interest groups and autonomous professional units are yet to be indicated in this document, but it is already well set up to take such a step.

Finally, both the Monash University and Swinburne University of Technology Research Management Plans indicate a need for active research in the field. Both are distinctive institutions, but the content of their documents, as in other cases noted above, neglect to indicate the organisational process of planning (Monash University 1998; Swinburne University of Technology 1996). In the case of the Monash plan, the reader is running the risk of carrying away an impression of the *formal-rational* dimension run wild. Average weighted funding figures, average weighted publications, and weighted research Masters and PhD completions confirm this impression (Monash University 1998, Table: Performance Indicators for Research). The university may quite legitimately be trying to put such comparative facts before staff in order to stimulate further research activity. But it does so at the risk of giving a distorted impression to its reading public. Research into the planning process itself is required to restore some sense of balance here. In the case of the Swinburne plan, the reader faces an extended exercise in the language of descriptive outcome stipulation. All sentences seem to begin with provide, ensure, improve, establish, highlight, and so on. The higher education research community needs now to recognise this as indicative of a phase that we have now gone through. What is needed are guidelines for more realistic and useful planning research and practice.

Planning is a mercurial topic. Control interacts with flexibility. Lack of resources force planning which asks for more resources for itself. The literature outlines complexities that busy practitioners will characteristically avoid. Increasing specificity brings on the law of diminishing returns. As in many areas of endeavour, working smarter rather than harder, promises worthwhile returns, but getting this adopted across the institution is very hard. Perhaps the most promising of developments is the correspondence between technical complexities that are now being addressed and the development of structuration theory that

promises clearer understandings of the nature of structural change in complex organisations. Working through those complexities is a topic for a further paper.

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