

**Paper for the *Educators and Planners: Symphony or Discord* Conference
AAIR Conference 1 – 3 December 1999**

**QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF A
NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITY AND POLYTECHNIC MERGER**

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ABSTRACT

Mergers between tertiary institutions generate opportunities for increasing competitive advantage in existing markets and developing new markets through programme consolidation, rationalisation, and academic programme development. But institutional benefits may accrue from academic programme development only in the event that adequate attention is directed to quality assurance within the merged institutional environment. This paper examines the process of establishing a joint humanities and social sciences academic programme in the context of the first merger of a New Zealand university with a polytechnic. Particular attention is given to decision-making processes associated with establishing a competitive academic programme taking account of the identified strengths and limitations of the existing programmes of both institutions, opportunities created, evident constraints, and differences in organisational cultures. Implications for academic programme development in the context of future institutional mergers are discussed and recommendations offered.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF A NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITY AND POLYTECHNIC MERGER

That quality assurance is essential in today's competitive tertiary education environment is unarguable (see e.g., Dearing, 1998; Duke, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Ramsden, 1998a). However, institutional mergers are commonly considered to be antithetical to any efforts to ensure quality in the business world (see e.g., van den Bergh, 1999) while commentators frequently condemn the effects of the commercial imperatives that have driven these, and other similar strategic alliances in higher education (see e.g., Gale, 1998; Marginson, 1997a, 1998). Links between management decisions relating to university structure and academic programme quality have been well established (Billing, 1998), while the specific effects upon quality assurance have been identified (see, e.g., Ramsden, 1998a, 1998b). But less frequently discussed are the opportunities for increased quality assurance afforded by tertiary sector mergers and the associated actions necessary to ensure that maximum benefit is derived from them. This paper examines those opportunities that have arisen for improved quality assurance for a university college of humanities and social sciences consequent upon the recent first New Zealand merger between a university and a polytechnic. It also outlines the processes and procedures that have been implemented to date to maximise the benefits derived from the merger for the College and identifies some of the potential limitations to quality assurance that have been, or have yet to be, addressed.

THE NEW ZEALAND TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR UNDER PRESSURE

Prior to the introduction of the 1990 Education Amendment Act, the current seven universities were the only degree-granting institutions in New Zealand. Today, this number has expanded to at least 36, with the higher education sector comprising, in addition to the universities, 25 polytechnics, four colleges of education, three wananga (government-approved learning institutions for Maori), 11 government training establishments, and over 700 private training establishments (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1999). (As of 1 January 2000, the number of universities will increase to a total of eight by virtue of the recent approval given for the Auckland Institute of Technology to be accorded university status (see Brook, 1999).) Added to the expansion of the tertiary education marketplace, universities have had to contend with differentials in government funding according to course cost category and a gradual decline in per cost category equivalent full-time student (EFTS) funding since 1992. It is anticipated that this decline in EFTS funding will continue in the event that the present government is elected in 1999, to enable the target of 72.5 per cent subsidy of total tuition costs set in the recent White Paper (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1999) to be met. However, significantly for institutions offering distance education programmes, extramural teaching will be funded at the same level as internal teaching in the same cost category. In addition, funding of postgraduate research is expected to increase. Nevertheless, almost without exception, all tertiary institutions will be forced to continue the pattern of annual increases in student fees prior to the 2000 academic year.

While the higher education marketplace expands and overall funding reductions continue, secondary school rolls are declining or remaining static, except in the Auckland region, with this pattern expected to continue for at least a further four years (Cassie, 1999a). The result is an expected short-term decline in the number of prospective school leaver entrants into the tertiary education sector. This decline is likely to be exacerbated by a probable increase in university and polytechnic tuition fees that will place pressure upon students to increase their already high level of indebtedness through taking out student loans. With the average debt per full-time student in 1998 amounting to \$ 6461 for university study, \$ 5859 for study at a polytechnic, and \$ 7791 for study at a private training establishment (Consumers' Institute, 1999), debt aversion may well be a significant factor in students' decision to participate in tertiary education in 2000. Students' perceptions of their employability at the conclusion of their study will also impact upon their study choices. With business and commerce graduates earning almost \$NZ 10 000 more than arts graduates (see NZVCC, 1998), humanities and social sciences subjects, needless to say, are likely to be

less favoured options. Yet, 2000 will see a further expansion in the number of arts degrees programmes offered in the New Zealand tertiary education sector.

The effect of these competitive and fiscal pressures upon higher education institutions in New Zealand is already evident this year with only one university reporting an operating surplus of greater than 6 per cent of total income at the end of the 1998 financial year, one university reporting a 3.4 per cent deficit, and the smallest university reporting a deficit for the second year in a row (Cassie, 1999b). In sum, there are very real commercial imperatives operating in the New Zealand tertiary education sector which demand a positive response on the part of most institutions to either consolidate or increase current market share, engage in market development, or create new markets through academic programme development. A merger provides an immediate potential opportunity for partner institutions to strengthen their respective positions in relation to their competitors and to increase market share. In the event that the partner institutions are in a different geographic area a merger will also enable them to undertake market development activities. In addition, through the use of combined resources, merged institutions may be well placed to create new markets through academic programme development. But, in an expanding marketplace with the prospect of only limited market growth, any revenue increase consequent upon institutional merger in the New Zealand tertiary education sector, must derive, at least in part, from a capacity to compete on the basis of academic programme quality.

AN EVIDENT NEED FOR GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

The merger of Massey University with Wellington Polytechnic on 1 July 1999, created both opportunities and challenges for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University. The merger had been foreshadowed as early as August 1997 when the Polytechnic chose Massey University as its preferred partner (Massey University, 1997). However, the College itself was only formally established from the former Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences on 1 January 1998. Over the period 1996-1997, the number of EFTS of the combined Faculties remained almost static with a 0.04 per cent increase in EFTS enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities and a 0.01 per cent decline in Faculty of Social Sciences EFTS (see Massey University, 1997). This was at a time when the total number of EFTS across the University increased by 12.4 per cent. At the conclusion of the 1998 academic year, College EFTS increased by 8 per cent to 4542.38 in comparison to an increase of only 3.4 per cent in total University EFTS. However, the projected 4 per cent drop in total University EFTS in 1999 is expected to also be reflected in this year's College figures. The College then faces an on-going challenge in matching revenue to expenditure and aligning expenditure to programme enrolments within the College.

A further matter for concern is the level of internal funding cross-subsidisation. Prior to the establishment of the College, there was little apparent difference in the staff-student ratio, with the ratio being 1:18.1 in humanities subjects and 1:17.4 in social sciences subjects in 1997 (Massey University, 1997). The College ratio increased from 1:17.7 to 1:19.2 in 1998 (Massey University, 1998) as a consequence of the increase in EFTS over the period 1997-1998 and a policy of deferring staff replacements. However, this increase has not been accompanied by significant reductions in inequities in internal funding levels. With EFTS funding decreasing, sustainability of cross-subsidisation becomes less justifiable (see Boston, 1999). Indeed, in the case of some discipline areas where demand is expanding, cross-subsidisation cannot continue to the same extent as it is now having the effect of limiting enrolment growth. This said, the College expects to retain a level of internal cross-subsidisation but to ensure transparency in associated decision-making. Decisions with respect to these matters will be affected by the overall shape and cohesion of the College's programmes.

Bearing in mind this contextual background, the merger of the University with Wellington Polytechnic comes at a time when resources are stretched and, in some instances, inequitably distributed. The merger

offers the prospect of reducing the resource shortage long term, but also suggests the possibility of demanding resource commitments stretching the College's limited resources in the short term.

ACTING UPON THE NEED TO INCREASE EFTS

To date, the need to increase EFTS and reduce funding inequities has been a major driver of developments in the College. In 1997, the College comprised 23 departments or sections with 243 full-time equivalent (FTE) academic staff, including 13 units with fewer than 10 staff with some units having staff located on more than one campus. By mid 1998, the College comprised six multi-disciplinary Schools and four Schools that were largely unchanged from former departments. No staff losses were incurred in the process of departmental amalgamation. Hence, some of the problems associated with reductions in senior staff members, which have commonly been the case in Australian tertiary institutions (see e.g., Stoljar, 1998; Healy, 1998), have been avoided. Nevertheless, Marginson (1998) warns that the creation of interdisciplinary schools often results in a flattening of diverse disciplinary traditions, with the outcome being that the role of peer relations in research decisions is reduced and emphasis necessarily shifts from quality of research findings to the quantity of research outcomes. In contrast, Jones (1998) argues that multi-disciplinary schools are essential if universities are to compete successfully in a marketplace that now includes institutions (polytechnics) that have historically confined their activities to teaching. He contends that multi-disciplinarity will better place universities to be adaptable to changing student needs while facilitating the pursuit of excellence in research and teaching that will provide a competitive edge in a highly competitive marketplace. Of interest here is whether the College's organisational structure, and associated changes to its operations, will not only place it in a better position to be competitive but also enable the College to maximise the potential benefits that may derive from merging with an institution that has previously been committed primarily to teaching activities. Specifically, will the College structure prove sufficiently adaptable to enable responsiveness to changed market needs? Can research and teaching quality, and the quality of the research and teaching link be maintained and, ideally, be enhanced? In addition, can all this be achieved without compromising existing commitments, given the financial constraints under which the University, like all other New Zealand tertiary institutes, currently operates?

To date, the positive outcomes of departmental mergers in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences have included: access to an increased student market and hence, increased viability for previously small academic programmes (e.g., Rehabilitation Studies); for staff of smaller programmes, increased collegial support and opportunity to contribute their areas of expertise to other programmes; student access to an increased number of papers to complete majoring requirements; reduced staff teaching load as a consequence of paper rationalisation in the event of previous duplication (e.g., in research methods papers), and increased examples of inter-disciplinary research. In addition, integration has enabled entrepreneurial activity on the part of discipline areas that were previously too small to achieve the economies of scale necessary to release sufficient resources for this activity. Disciplinary integrity has been maintained in most instances as Schools often include professorial staff who have a commitment to professing their discipline in, and beyond the University. However, departmental amalgamation and associated rationalisation has, as Marginson (1998) suggests might be the case, threatened the subject independence of some smaller areas. This said, the potential loss of disciplinary integrity in such instances has had to be weighed up against the possibility of loss of viability due to declining enrolments and internal competition.

Added to the changes in organisational structure within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences have been changes to the administration of academic programmes. Undergraduate degree regulations have been reviewed to reduce programme duplication in some instances and to enhance transparency for students; majoring requirements have been reviewed to reduce inter-School competition, and revised degree schedules have been introduced to reduce barriers to student enrolment created by unnecessary

prerequisites, co-requisites, or requirements for Head of School approval. In short, the College has enhanced the efficiency of its service delivery. But, as indicated earlier, there remains an imperative for the College to increase its total number of EFTS, but not at the expense of failing to maintain existing programme commitments.

THE PROMISES OF THE MERGER

Though the College of Humanities and Social Sciences has, since 1993, offered its academic programme across two campuses (Palmerston North and Albany (Auckland)), most of its EFTS are derived from enrolments in Palmerston North-based internal and extramural programmes. However, with a regional decline in school leaver numbers expected to continue for the next four years (see Cassie, 1999a), and competition increasing from other regionally-based tertiary institutions offering traditional arts degree programmes, the College must look towards delivering its programmes closer to its potential student markets. The University's merger with Wellington Polytechnic provides an opportunity for this objective to be achieved. There are four principal, but not exclusive, reasons why this is the case.

The former Wellington Polytechnic offered two well-established undergraduate health sciences degree programmes: a Bachelor of Midwifery (BM) and a Bachelor of Nursing (BN) earning a combined total of some 300+ EFTS per year. Upon implementation of the merger, the College became the only New Zealand University faculty to offer a BM, and the first University faculty to offer a BN degree. The inclusion of these degrees in the College's academic programme completes the well-established postgraduate programme of nursing and midwifery qualifications offered at Albany and Palmerston North by the School of Health Sciences. There is an opportunity to strengthen the School's overall programme through an increase in EFTS as well as promote pipeline growth from the undergraduate programme to the School's advanced professional programme. In addition, professional requirements to include social sciences subjects in the midwifery and nursing programmes provide opportunities for growth in other College programmes, particularly those of the Schools of Sociology and Women's Studies, and Maori Studies.

The School of Social Policy and Social Work is also well placed to increase its market share as a consequence of the institutional merger. This follows from being able to offer internal teaching programmes at Wellington in direct competition with other tertiary institutions at a time when another major provider of social work education in the region has suspended its undergraduate social work programme. A chance to build market share at undergraduate level also suggests the prospect of pipeline growth into postgraduate programmes should the School choose to offer them in Wellington in the future.

Establishment of Wellington-based operations also enables the College to draw upon the advantages of multi-disciplinary Schools, recent programme administration improvements, and rationalisation of paper offerings, to develop new academic programmes based upon existing successful developments in some areas. In so doing, the College may well be in a position to generate new markets. Importantly, too, the College will be better placed to service its external partners based in Wellington by being able to offer direct teaching at Wellington with all College advisory and administrative services locally available.

Finally, the merger enables the College to consolidate and possibly strengthen its position in extramural service delivery. With a campus operation based in Wellington the College is able to offer a combination of internal, block mode, and extramural teaching to local students with on-site teaching and administrative support for all students available at Wellington. The proximity of teaching support for Wellington-based and students located close to the Wellington region provides an opportunity to enhance the quality of extramural service delivery and to be more responsive to student needs. As indicated earlier, irrespective of opportunities, it will be the extent to which the College is able to achieve quality assurance, and ideally

the objective suggested here, of quality enhancement, that will dictate the degree of success for the College that is attributable to the merger.

AIMING FOR EXCELLENCE THROUGH QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

The Massey University and Wellington Polytechnic union has been greeted with scepticism by some in university quarters, principally on the basis that, upon merger, academic programme quality cannot be assured (see e.g., Kelsey, 1999; Munz, 1999; Williams, 1999). Such scepticism might well be expected in light of the Australian experience where the higher education sector is commonly anxious about the possibility of being exposed to lower standards as a consequence of merging with lesser rated tertiary institutions (Leahy, 1999). Brook (1999) goes some way towards countering these concerns by arguing that though New Zealand polytechnics have traditionally focused upon vocationally-based education, the knowledge bases of those professions, such as nursing, have significantly advanced. As a consequence he suggests that polytechnics have not only advanced in the teaching of theoretical and applied knowledge but have also extended traditional disciplines. However, such comments do not adequately address the principal concern that polytechnic academic programmes are not subject to the same level of critique as university-based programmes prior to approval (e.g., Williams, 1999). In simpler terms, Butterfield, Chambers, Moseley, Prebble, Uys, and Woodhouse (1999) would argue that of interest is first, the extent to which the institution, in this instance the merged institution, ensures quality; and, secondly, the capacity of an external agency to determine that it does. According to Butterfield et al., quality assurance with respect to the Massey University at Wellington programmes would refer to the extent to which there is a match between the programme objectives set and the way the merged institution goes about attaining these objectives.

But Butterfield et al.'s (1999) definition of quality assurance does not adequately acknowledge the power of consumers in the competitive higher education environment and overlooks the role of publicly available information on quality in ensuring stakeholder accountability (see McDaniel, 1997). Prospective students, parents, and employers who may fund their employees' education, are not interested simply in how a tertiary institution meets its self-imposed objectives. Commonly, stakeholder decision-making is based upon inter-institutional comparisons with respect to the *quality* of academic programme outcomes *and* the *quality* of the processes by which those outcomes are achieved (see Jenkins, 1998). Bearing this point in mind, Massey University, and hence the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, has a vested interest in aiming for excellence, rather than minimal standards of acceptability, both in its academic programme outputs and in the associated service delivery processes. Quality improvement then derives from enhancement of academic programme design and the design of service delivery processes, not from academic audit (adapted from Billing, 1998).

In saying that "quality by design" is the key to establishing a competitive advantage in relation to other tertiary institutions Billing (1998, p. 140) draws attention to the relationship between organisational management and academic programme quality and hints at the imperatives necessary to establish and maintain a competitive edge. He suggests that there are three outcomes necessary for academic programme delivery. First, sufficient value should be added through curriculum development and delivery process design to reduce the gap between students' expectations and their perceptions; preferably, students' expectations should be exceeded. Second, emphasis should be placed upon consistency of service delivery processes without compromising the variety of services available. For this to be achieved, Billing suggests that there must be a common shared purpose and an organisational structure that will foster the necessary commitment, energy and capacity to achieve the desired outcome. Third, rather than directing resources to addressing exceptional factors that may contribute to an environment conducive to achieving the University's objectives, Billing points to the need for managerial efforts to be directed towards such activities as improving academic curricula, updating inefficient technologies, and promoting academic leadership. Though it is early in the process of

establishing a merged academic programme for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Wellington, it is the broader notions of quality and quality assurance implied here, rather than the more restricted notion of “fitness for purpose,” that have driven, and will continue to guide the College’s efforts at Wellington.

ENSURING QUALITY BY DESIGN

Prior to the merger

Though quality by design has been a motivation for initiatives taken by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Wellington, management of the College’s activities at Wellington has been less preplanned than this statement might suggest. Largely, this has been as a consequence of external events that delayed the implementation date of the merger by eighteen months (see Massey University, 1998). However, within the College there has always been the recognition that a high degree of congruence is necessary between the College’s strategic direction and the cultural and structural aspects of the College’s organisation, if it is to establish and maintain a competitive position at Wellington (see Davies, 1997). As a consequence, College initiatives have not only been consistent with the College’s long-term strategic planning but have also been responsive to unanticipated events that have required either a change of direction, attention to an issue that may not previously have been considered problematic, or a revision of priorities. It is intended then, that programme developments and process improvements will be consistent with the final cultural underpinnings of the College at Wellington, and as a consequence, be successfully implemented (see Galpin, 1996).

Specifically, with the delay in merger implementation, the University established a “working partnership” with Wellington Polytechnic in preparation for the merger (Massey University, 1998, p. 5). For the College this meant the opportunity to begin to establish collaborative relationships with staff at Wellington with minimal financial and staffing implications for either the College or the partner institution. With the initial topic for consideration being a proposed joint academic programme to be offered in 1999, there was an opportunity to foreshadow a programme that would build on the strengths of the existing Polytechnic programme; offer papers that complemented, rather than competed with established Polytechnic papers, and serve as the basis for advancing the College’s long-term strategy for Wellington. Decisions were therefore made about which papers were to be offered at Wellington on the basis of eight criteria that were identified during initial discussion between University and Polytechnic representatives, with consideration given to the College’s and Schools’ respective long-term strategic plans. To be included in the proposed programme a paper needed to: be able to generate a high number of new EFTS; be able to be taught by or co-taught with Polytechnic staff; have a direct relationship to marketable qualifications; be marketable in and of itself; contribute to programme integrity; support existing community trends; replace an existing Polytechnic paper or complement, but not compete with, existing Polytechnic papers, and have an existing potential enrolment base (Anderson, R. Memorandum, 19 March, 1998). Based upon these criteria and with reference to strategic considerations, a total of eight papers able to contribute to any one of seven University programmes were selected for offer in 1999.

To ensure equivalence of University papers to be offered at Wellington and those already offered at Palmerston North and Albany, identical learning outcomes, and equivalent assessment requirements and associated criteria, and procedures for moderation and course evaluation were applied with respect to the Wellington-taught papers. Consistency in teaching quality was assured by Heads of Schools’ commitment to at least one-third of each paper being taught by University staff and the responsibility for development of the Wellington-based papers being assigned to coordinators already responsible for the teaching of the papers at Palmerston North. To ensure that all teaching contributed to overall paper integrity there was an expectation that University staff would work in closely with their Polytechnic colleagues. One of the unexpected positive spin-offs of this last decision has been initial moves towards

the establishment of collegiality between College and Polytechnic staff and a significant commitment on the part of Wellington-based staff to participating in College activities often beyond those of simply teaching the papers assigned to them.

A further outcome of the long lead-in time for the merger has been the integration of former Polytechnic staff into the culture of the Schools to which they are most closely academically affiliated. Such integration has proven most successful where Heads of Schools have maintained regular personal contact with Wellington staff, included them in School staff meetings where such items as strategic planning have been discussed; invited them to participate in curriculum development meetings; encouraged their input in study guide development; required them to work alongside other staff in the marking of final examinations, and spent time discussing and facilitating the meeting of professional development needs. Significantly too, under such circumstances curriculum development has been advanced through discussion with Wellington colleagues, and long term, will lead to value being added not only to Wellington-based teaching but also to those papers taught on other campuses. Understandably perhaps, less successful outcomes have followed from occasions when there have been fewer opportunities for former Polytechnic staff to visit the University campus or contribute to course planning and development. Notably, this has occurred often because cultural differences between the two institutions have been underestimated, meaning that assumptions have been made about the levels of communication that could be expected in the event that additional support or guidance was required in the teaching of College papers at Wellington.

Critical services in support of the development of University programmes had to be available at Wellington from the beginning of 1999. These included admission and enrolment services and library support services. In the first instance these were provided and coordinated centrally. Though admission and enrolment services are commonly provided partly centrally and partly by Colleges, centralised coordination of these services was essential to ensure that parallel processes were implemented without compromising long-standing Polytechnic systems. Similarly, student access to library services was centrally coordinated. However, it quickly became apparent that while centralised services were designed to provide necessary but not exceptional support for Wellington-based Massey University students, expectations were created in both students and staff for servicing to be at least equal to that available to Massey University students on other sites. In part at least, such expectations arose from the integration of staff into the culture of the College and students' desire to be Massey students. Addressing the apparent gap between services and delivery expectations was very much dependent upon close communication links having been established between the College and Wellington-based students and staff, and the ever-present opportunity to feed back identified problems or concerns to those coordinating University operations at Wellington. In short, the College could not afford to relinquish interest in the level of support services available to its students and staff at Wellington given the paramountcy it attributes to retaining and growing the commitment of its key stakeholders in Wellington.

Subsequent to the merger

Since the merger, the gains made in terms of establishing collegial relationships with former Polytechnic staff and putting in place initial support services have served as the basis for further developments at Wellington. Of singular priority is the establishment of a combined suite of academic programmes at Wellington that is consistent with the strategic direction of the merged institution as a whole, and that of the College in particular. To this end, programme reviews have been implemented with respect to key qualifications previously offered by Wellington Polytechnic. These reviews have facilitated positive curricula developments in target programmes, and also prompted a wider review of those postgraduate programmes with which Wellington-based undergraduate programmes are to be articulated. In addition, the reviews have further fostered collegial relations among staff and prompted wider cooperation across campuses.

Implementation of programme reviews has, however, highlighted some key differences in the expectations of staff as a consequence of different institutional cultures and patterns of communication, and different organisational structures. For example, where the College Pro Vice-Chancellor might, in consultation with a Head of School, charge a small group of School staff with responsibility for programme development, seeking the advice of relevant external stakeholders and formulating recommendations for subsequent School consideration, former Polytechnic staff would anticipate being involved in a lengthy consultation process and decisions to be made consensually. For University staff, consensual decision-making is usually viewed with some ambivalence. Though ideal, consensual processes are often regarded as detracting from research, allowing minorities to exercise a veto and are frequently seen as an added commitment on top of administration and teaching. In addition, College staff are commonly aware that the College and University committee structures provide opportunities for them to contribute to final decisions. Throughout the review process, and on other occasions, it has therefore been essential for senior College staff to understand the accepted and expected way by which decisions are made; to communicate the intended decision-making processes to Wellington-based College staff, and to engender confidence in those staff that opportunities will be available for their contribution.

Associated with the need to clearly communicate alternative decision-making strategies at the Wellington campus, it has also been important to demonstrate the academic leadership role of senior College staff, rather than simply the expected managerial role (see Munz, 1999) and to promote this attribute in Wellington-based staff. This last has been particularly assisted by integration of former Polytechnic staff into their respective Schools rather than merely creating a new School consisting of all Wellington-based staff. In addition, discussions associated with employment contract options available to Wellington staff have highlighted the importance attributed to academic leadership and scholarship and pointed to options available to staff for their future professional development. Alongside such discussions, contact with University staff members during the lead up to the merger has enabled identification of mutual academic interests and led, in some cases, to mutual research interests being identified and University and former Polytechnic staff beginning to work collaboratively on research projects. Thus, though formal discussions with Wellington-based staff with respect to organisational structure and employment conditions have been, and continue to be, an essential part of the merger process, and are certainly fundamental to the establishment of a consolidated academic programme at Wellington, it has been the joint process of striving for excellence that has provided the best opportunity for achieving it.

Looking ahead

While quality enhancement is the objective for the development of the College's academic plan at Wellington, achievement of this objective is dependent upon astute and appropriate resourcing decisions within the College. To this end, planning for 2000 has involved ensuring that funding level inequities are addressed at least in part, so that papers needed to support flagship programmes in Wellington can be offered by under-funded Schools; procedures are available for transfer of School staff from campuses where there is evidence of enrolment decline to Wellington, in the event that enrolment growth is anticipated there, and that Schools are able to continue to meet their teaching commitments on other campuses in the event that they wish to also offer papers at Wellington. The outcome has been the decision to offer a total of fifteen papers in 2000, with papers offered at 200-level which build upon those 100-level papers first offered in 1999 and which principally contribute to an Undergraduate Certificate in Arts, a Bachelor of Arts degree or a Bachelor of Social Work degree. To these will be added 300-level papers for 2001. Future developments will obviously need to be consistent with the College's long-term strategy for multi-campus development and will, in part, be dependent upon the success of the College's programme at Wellington in 2000 and future government funding decisions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE MERGERS

The Australian tertiary sector experiences suggest that institutional mergers can threaten the longstanding reputations of universities as places of “higher learning.” But in New Zealand the question remains an open one: Does an institutional merger necessarily mean that quality is compromised? Evidence points to merger successes in a competitive higher education environment being dependent upon more than demonstrable quality assurance; the capacity to demonstrate exceptionality through quality enhancement would seem an essential prerequisite for success. But with shrinking funding resources available to the majority of university subject areas, the resourcing demands of quality enhancement in a merged environment can seem prohibitive for a single faculty. This is particularly so given that areas of excess capacity relative to earned funding within a partnering institution, cannot easily be anticipated. The experience of Massey University’s College of Humanities and Social Sciences suggests that there are advantages in being able to reduce excess capacity and internal competition; promote greater interdisciplinary cooperation; make inroads to reducing internal funding inequities, and minimise barriers to student enrolment, in advance of an institutional merger taking place. Such action reduces, but does not necessarily avoids, negative short-term resourcing implications; provides an environment in which cross-disciplinary cooperation in teaching and research is encouraged, and enables potentially greater responsiveness to changed student needs.

Partnership arrangements established prior to a merger clearly provide opportunity for the establishment of trust and cooperation in teaching areas in particular, without substantive implications for either institution. Within the merged context, such cooperation can be built on by fully involving staff of both partner institutions in the curriculum development of joint academic programmes arising out of their respective separate programmes. The outcome can be significant quality enhancement of target programmes as well as improvement in other related programmes. Research activity too, can benefit through new opportunities for collegial cooperation; as a consequence research-teaching links in faculty programmes may be strengthened.

But, despite the potential benefits of an institutional merger for a university faculty, there are potential pitfalls that should not be overlooked. This is particularly the case where there is an element of geographical distance between the two partnering institutions. First, adequate resources must be available to develop and sustain an academic programme on the new site; this includes resourcing for associated administration of faculty programmes. Second, priority must be given to ensuring that opportunities are provided for staff in the University’s partner institution to participate to the extent that is possible, in faculty and departmental-equivalent discussions relating to organisational discussions and programme curriculum. This said, it is important that partner institution staff are aware of the boundaries within which they have opportunity to comment, and yet that confidence is engendered in decision-making processes. In order to foster excellence in both teaching and research, attention must also be given to identifying new staff members’ research interests and to promoting opportunities for research activity and necessary professional development. Above all, the need to ensure the mutual commitment of both partnering institutions to the merger is essential if any element of success is to be achieved, much less if the objective of academic programme excellence is to be attained.

FOOTNOTE

The merger agreement between Massey University and the former Wellington Polytechnic has not long been implemented. Consequently, the long-term implications for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences can only be anticipated; they cannot be defined at this stage. But what is clear to date, is that the College has an opportunity to increase its market share and to identify potential new student markets. Whether it is successful or not will depend upon its capacity to deliver an academic programme that is notable for its exceptionality (quality exceeding that of programmes offered by the University’s

competitors) as well as its ability to serve as the basis for anticipating and being responsive to changing market needs. Only time, factors not always in the College's control and the criticality of those factors, will determine its level of success in achieving this objective.

Acknowledgement

I am particularly grateful for the advice and support given to me in the preparation of this document by Professor B. Macdonald, Pro Vice-Chancellor, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Massey University.

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