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

'WE'RE FROM THE PLANNING SUPPORT OFFICE, AND WE'RE HERE TO HELP'

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ABSTRACT

The Planning Support Office at the University of Sydney provides a range of services, both pro-active and re-active, to support the academic enterprise. A variety of models that have been developed to support administrative functions – enrolment and load projection models, the faculty funding model, course budget plans – is used at the request of academic staff to model possible changes to academic programs and structures so that the likely impacts can be understood and planned for. Departments planning to introduce fee-paying postgraduate courses can model likely scenarios of student intakes, staffing and other inputs and preferred fee levels to see whether the course will actually make money for the department, or be a drain on resources.

Planning Support Office staff are also regularly asked to provide training and advice to staff across the University on a wide range of subjects including the mysteries of funding (both to and within the University), on budget preparation and on the development of course structures.

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1.INTRODUCTION

I would like to relate this paper directly to the theme of the 10th AAIR International Conference, 'Educators and Planners: Symphony or Discord’, and I quote directly from the Registration Brochure:

> Educators often ask: *'Is the work of institutional planners and researchers grounded in the reality of the learning process?'* Conversely planners often ask: *'Is the work of educators grounded in the reality of a competitive, customer-driven environment?'*

At the University of Sydney, educators use the services of the Planning Support Office to assess the financial and market implications of various educational initiatives. In a reversal of the usual focus, we often have to remind our academic colleagues that the decisions they take need to be based primarily on academic, not financial, considerations.

I think we have this role because we have been set up this way: we are a Planning **Support** Office, rather than a 'Planning Office', a 'Management Information Branch' or an 'Institutional Research Unit'. While our functions cover the production of student and staff statistics for DETYA and for official University publications, the production of the University's Budget, development of much of the University's Profile submission and input into a wide range of policy issues, we nevertheless have a strong ethos grounded in the concept of **supporting** the planning process at all levels within the University. And whether they like it or not, one of the main functions expected these days of senior academic staff is planning. They are expected to be academic planners, financial planners and strategic planners.

So in the context in which I work, I reject the notion of the implied dichotomy between 'educators' and 'planners'. Primarily, the planners **are** educators, generally with titles such as Head of Department, Dean, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Deputy-Vice-Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor. The role of people such as ourselves, at least at the University of Sydney, is to provide **support** to the planners in the form of research, modelling tools, analysis and specialist advice.

2.PLANNING TOOLS

There are four major planning tools that the Planning Support Office (PSO) has at its disposal:
1. Enrolment and load projection model
2. Funding model, incorporating research performance indicators
3. Course Budget Plan
4. Fee projection model.

Some of these are tools that have been developed for administrative purposes – their use as predictive tools in the service of the wider University community is not their primary role. Others have been developed specifically to meet the needs of the academic staff for modelling various scenarios.

There is also a range of data that is compiled and published – in hard copy or on the web – on an annual basis:
1. Degree load pass rates
2. Research degree completion rates
3. Student load by funding category, level and degree.

It is these tools and data, either singly or in combination, coupled with our collective expertise and ingenuity, that enable us to answer most questions put to us by our academic colleagues and specifically, to answer those questions that relate to issues of resources.

The PSO also plays a major role in developing the University's Strategic Plan, it's Profile submission to DETYA, and the University's annual Budget Document. Through these vehicles, and the questions that arise in the process of their development, the PSO also has the opportunity to both reflect and influence educational policy and directions at the macro level.

3.THE PRESENT CONTEXT

'The reality of a competitive, customer-driven environment'. What are the characteristics of such an environment? Specifically, what are the characteristics of the higher education environment in which we are operating to-day?

We have a situation of government-imposed financial stringencies, exacerbated by the funding reductions that have been applied progressively from 1997 to 2000, and by the lack of salary supplementation over recent years. Consequently, we need to supplement our discretionary income by enrolling fee-paying students. Such students, whether local or international, expect, and have every right to expect, a quality of educational experience commensurate with the fees they are paying. And since we rarely educate our fee-paying students separately from those who pay HECS, we must provide this quality of education to all our students. There is aggressive competition among universities for the 'best' students, leading to a constant re-assessment of programs and a proliferation of boutique degree courses. Competition for fee-paying post-graduate students has also led to a huge increase in the number of postgraduate coursework programs on offer, often nothing more than a previous specialisation now given its own name, or a masters degree that has now been broken down into a Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and a Coursework Masters to allow for as many entry and exit points as possible.

We also seek to maximise discretionary income by trying to obtain as large a share as possible of any government income available on a competitive basis. Key sources of such income are the Research Quantum and the Research Infrastructure Block Grant (RIBG), so we seek to maximise our research productivity not just for its own sake, but in order to increase our share of this bounty.

We also have a government that is placing increasing emphasis on quality assurance, on so-called 'performance indicators', and is talking increasingly about outcomes-based funding.

These factors have the effect of pitting department against department for every available dollar. They also lead academics to think carefully about the strategic value of many actions they contemplate. Frequently they are looking no further than the financial impact on their own department or faculty. One of our roles is to make sure that consideration is given to the financial and educational impact of whatever they are proposing on all parts and the whole of the University.

In this paper I will concentrate on questions that come to us from the academic community that relate ultimately to issues of resources, although the questions themselves may not be couched in those terms. I have chosen this line not because it is the only sort of question that we receive, but because such questions frequently call for the use of all our major areas of expertise, and because they reflect the importance that educators are placing on 'the reality of a competitive (and **sometimes** customer-driven) environment'.

This is not to imply that our interaction on these matters with the academic community is solely on a re-active basis. Often it is pro-active, as we provide them with data and analyses which prompt them to particular courses of behaviour. Needless to say, often one of those courses of behaviour is to contact the PSO and ask for some additional analysis or some interpretation of what they have already been given, or, indeed, to proffer criticism of the way data has been presented, interpreted or calculated. This is healthy, and results in a continual flow of information in both directions.

4.THE QUESTIONS

The questions we are asked come in many formats and from many sources. Often the hardest part of the task is finding out from the Admin Assistant who has phoned you just what it is that Professor Bloggs wanted to know when she asked him to find out how many PhD students their department was allowed to enrol. The simple answer, that there is no quota on such students, and the department can enrol as many as it can accommodate and supervise, may bear no relationship to what Professor Bloggs needs to know. The real issue may be that another faculty wishes to enrol a doctoral candidate who would be supervised by a member of Professor Bloggs' department. Bloggs assumes that funding for that student would flow to the other faculty, and is looking for a reason to refuse to supervise the student.

So, as well as providing answers to questions, an important part of our role is in educating members of the University community about how things work. The major areas of ignorance are:

1. How the University is funded by DETYA (No, Virginia, there is no DETYA funding model, at least, not one that determines how much money we will get for that extra student you are thinking of enrolling);
2. How EFTSU is calculated, indeed, what EFTSU means. A remarkable number of our academic staff seem to be under the impression that an EFTSU is a student funded by DETYA, as distinct from a fee-paying student;
3. Where to find student load data, at a highly disaggregated level; and
4. How the University's funding model works.

The following are some of the typical questions staff in the PSO deal with on a regular basis. They are expressed here in such a way as to convey what the questioner wanted to know, as distinct from what they (probably) asked:

- What will be the impact of the proposed change in the structure of my degree on:
    - EFTSU?
    - Funding?
- What level of fees do I need to charge students to ensure that my Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma/Coursework Masters will make money for the department rather than be a drain on resources?
- What will be the financial impact of restructuring my faculty to decrease the number of departments, in line with current University strategy?
- What are the funding implications of putting on a new course designed specifically for Aboriginal students?
- Why does my department show up as having a Research Performance rank of 7 out of 10, when everyone knows we're the best department of Underwater Basketweaving in the country?
- How much does my department earn for the teaching it does to students enrolled in a specific degree offered by another faculty?
- Which is of greater benefit to my department:
    - Spending more time on research;
    - Enrolling more research students; or
    - Enrolling more fee-paying students?
- Are you SURE you've counted all my EFTSUs????

These are the questions. No one person in the Office has all these questions directed to them, and no one person in the Office can answer them all. How do we work as a team to ensure that we provide an appropriate response as efficiently as possible?

5.FIELDING THE QUESTIONS

There is one person within the PSO who is the designated contact for those with statistical enquiries relating to students and staff. Of course, many of the questions he is asked are just that – statistical – and he deals with these expeditiously, often directing the questioner to the publication or web site where they could have found the answer for themselves. However, a little digging on his part may reveal that the real purpose of the question goes well beyond the statistical and is really about resources. Many questions of this type are also directed to the person in the Office the questioner knows best, or feels most comfortable talking to. In either case, the person initially contacted may or may not be the appropriate contact. In such cases they may be able to answer only part of the question, and will need to go to others to get the full answer. Often the details of the question and the questioner, as well as any information collected so far, will be passed on to the relevant member of staff. In an office of 11 people, it is not usually difficult to determine where the question should ultimately be directed, without forcing the hapless questioner to make three of four phone calls before they finally and fortuitously find the person they should have spoken to in the first place. Unfortunately, this may still be the experience of the person who is not aware of the role of the PSO, and who initially directs their question to an equally uninformed member of staff or part of the University.

Of course, the converse may also be true. Sometimes the person is asking what on the surface appears to be a question about resources that they would expect to be answered by reference to the funding model, only to be told that the answer is in the hands of their College Pro-Vice-Chancellor or Dean. Again, a brief lesson in how the funding model works may be required. The model, while developing funding allocations from data at departmental level, is in fact used to allocate funds to Colleges, that is, aggregations of faculties. It is up to each of the three College Pro-Vice-Chancellors to determine the allocation for each faculty in his or her College, and up to each dean to distribute funds to departments.

6.ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS

In section 4 above I gave an indication of the sort of questions we are asked. What I want to do now is give an outline of how we use the planning tools and data sources mentioned in section 2 to answer these questions.

- What will be the impact of the proposed change in the structure of my degree on:
    - EFTSU?
    - Funding?

The first part of this question can be readily answered by reference to our enrolment and load projection model. Academics may have to provide a bit more input into this process that they would generally like, such as thinking about which department is going to teach what share of the course under the proposed structure, but they can usually be persuaded to come up with some sort of approximation.

The second part of the question requires the use of the funding model. A first approximation of the change in funding **to the Colleges**, albeit broken down to department level, can be provided by substituting the revised load projections for the actual load used in the most recent version of the model. The questioner must always be reminded that the figures so produced are indicative only, and that funding to faculties and departments is in the hands of Pro-Vice-Chancellors and deans respectively.

- What level of fees do I need to charge students to ensure that my Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma/Coursework Masters will make money for the department rather than be a drain on resources?

To answer questions such as this the PSO devised some years ago an Excel model known as a **Course Budget Plan**. With the aid of some assumptions about load projections, and some further assumptions about staffing and non-salary costs, anyone considering putting on a fee-paying course can test the fee they are planning to charge to see if the course has any chance of actually making money for the department concerned. While Deans have the authority to approve fee levels for such courses, it is a University requirement that courses should at least be expected to break even after three years. Built into the model is the current University policy on the share of fee income that can be retained at College level. Those planning fee-paying courses need to find out what share of the income will be taken by the College and the faculty and build this into the model to get an accurate picture of the financial benefit to the department.

While many have a fee in mind at the start, based on similar courses either at Sydney or another University, others have no idea what they want to charge. Some are keen to charge as little as possible (typically in the humanities), while others know that their potential clients can afford to pay as much as the department thinks it can get away with (the faculties of Medicine and Dentistry come to mind.) The Course Budget Plan can be used to show what the break-even fee would be, and what would happen if the department's (usually) over-optimistic predictions about intake levels are not met. While some departments have actually done some real market research by the time they come to us, many regard market research as asking a few colleagues if they think such a course would be a good idea, and getting a majority of positive responses. Unfortunately, this is not an area in which we are able to offer them any assistance.

- What will be the financial impact of restructuring my Faculty to decrease the number of departments, in line with current University strategy?

This is becoming a difficult question, and one to which there is often no simple answer. Funding model input can be recalculated based on the proposed structure, and in some instances the funding model can be re-run to examine outcomes. However, often any restructuring involves the combination of two or more departments that are currently in different cost bands within the funding model. Since the PSO has no authority to decide on cost bands for the new entities, indicative ranges of funding outcomes are all that can be provided.

As more and more faculties seek to restructure into fewer departments, this is becoming a politically sensitive issue. Faculties have had to be told that they should not consider perceived funding outcomes when they make decisions about academic structures. Nevertheless, at least one faculty has decided not to reduce the number of departments because it failed to gain an assurance that their funding would be increased if they did so.

- What are the funding implications of putting on a new course designed specifically for Aboriginal students?

This is a question that carries resource implications on four different levels – the University, the relevant Aboriginal Education Centre, the College, and the department(s) concerned. The last three can be answered by reference to the funding model. The first question is also in the purview of the PSO, since the Office is, apart from the Vice-Chancellor, the primary point of contact between the University and DETYA on matters relating to Aboriginal funding.

The University has two Aboriginal Support Centres. Each provides support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as well as offering a range of enabling and award courses, and providing teaching in Aboriginal issues across the University. Through its funding model, the University:

- shares all the Support Funding provided by DETYA between the two Centres;
- funds the two Centres for the their teaching and research in the same way all other departments are funded (but without the funding being filtered through a College Pro-Vice-Chancellor);
- funds the two Centres for the other activities which they undertake in the provision of Aboriginal education and support which are not covered by any of the above; and
- provides each College with $3,000/EFTSU for all load taught to Aboriginal students outside the two Centres, to be spent for the advancement of Aboriginal students and education.

So, if a faculty wants to offer a course for Aboriginal students:

- Support Funding from DETYA to the University will probably increase. The method of allocating this funding to Universities is such that the size of the increase cannot be predicted;
- The increase in Support Funding will flow to whichever Centre is designated as providing support for those students;
- The department(s) teaching the course will receive additional funding due to an increase in EFTSU. This can be estimated from the funding model based on estimates of load in the course; and
- The College in which the faculty offering the course is located will receive an additional $3,000 for every EFTSU in the course.

▪ Why does my department show up as having a Research Performance rank of 7 out of 10, when everyone knows we're the best department of Underwater Basketweaving in the country?

This is a bit more complicated. In fact, there is a small group of academics, driven by the department of Underwater Basketweaving, that is at present trying to prove mathematically that the calculation of the Research Performance ranks is flawed, and disadvantages large departments. They may be right. In the meantime, all we can do is show them, in detail, how the calculation is done. If they have theories as to why they think the data may be biased against the University of Sydney, we can try to allay their fears. In general, they go away, glassy-eyed, or, at the very least, too embarrassed to admit that they haven't understood the explanation. But they are always grateful that someone has at least taken the trouble to explain the process to them, and as a rule they find that reassuring. As to whether the rank is correct, time and some further analysis will tell.

▪ How much does my department earn for the teaching it does to students enrolled in a specific degree offered by another faculty?

A much simpler question. The first step is to find out the units of study concerned. The second is to consult the PSO web site where we have 'Student Load by Funding Category, Level and Degree'. From this table it is possible to identify the amount of load being generated in the department by students in the degree concerned in each of the relevant units of study. The students are identified according to their funding category, so if there are fee-paying students involved, they can be looked at separately. As a rule we try to take the person asking the question through this process, in order to familiarise them with the table and the wealth of information that can be found there.

The final step is to examine the funding model, or, in the case of fee-paying students, the fee being charged, and determine the amount that the identified level of EFTSU is 'earning' for the department concerned. As with all funding model issues, the questioner needs to be reminded that the model does not determine funding to the department, only to the College.

- Which is of greater benefit to my department:
  - Spending more time on research;
  - Enrolling more research students; or
  - Enrolling more fee-paying students?

This is not a question that can be answered categorically – it cannot really even be answered hypothetically. What we can do is to explain the relevant parts of the funding model, and compare, for example, the funding attributed per research EFTSU with the additional funding they would earn per FTE academic staff if their increased research effort were to actually result in an increase in their Research Performance rank. We also need to point out the time lag in the research funding (3 years) compared with the time lag in funding for actual EFTSU (1 ½ years), and the uncertainty of the former since it depends on improvement at a rate greater than occurs both in other universities and in other departments. We must also remind them of the uncertainty of the various fee-paying markets, and the proportion of fee income that the University takes before the department receives its share. Of course, they need to remember that enrolling more research students may, in itself, lead to an increase in research output.

- Are you SURE you've counted all my EFTSUs????

Firstly, we refer them to the 'Student Load by Funding Category, Level and Degree' table on the web for their department, and ask them to check that all their units of study are there. If they are, we ask them to look at the weight attributed to each unit of study, and the share shown for any units of study which they might co-teach with other departments. From time to time errors **are** detected – usually relating to units of study that have been attributed to the wrong department through the Student Records System, or shared load that has been attributed incorrectly. The extent to which corrective action is taken depends on the size of the error and its source. If the error is small and can be shown to be the department's responsibility, then the error will be corrected for the future, but no funding adjustment will be made. At the other end of the scale, if the error is large and the PSO has some share of the responsibility, then as well as correcting for the future, funding will be adjusted. If the error is discovered after the funding model has been run based on the incorrect data, an estimate of the funding implication of the error is made and **manual** adjustments made. That is to say, an amount is added to the allocation for the College concerned, and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor advised of the reason for the adjustment.

Although such changes often mean that some department has been attributed with too much load, as well as the questioning department having received too little, only positive funding adjustments are made.

7.THE PRO-ACTIVE ROLE

Not everything the PSO does in terms of providing information to the academic community occurs as a result of questions we are asked. 'Degree Load Pass Rates' and 'Research Degree Completion Rates' are published periodically, not because the data is of particular use to the PSO, but because the information can only be produced from our databases, and is of use to the academic community. It enables them to identify areas of strength and areas of weakness, and apply the lessons that can be learned from the former to try to improve the latter.

Similarly, a variety of sets of performance indicators are prepared and published by the PSO. The impetus for a number of these has come from specific requests – one set developed this year came about because one faculty wanted to know more about its research performance in relation to other Universities, and within the University. And if you're doing that sort of exercise for one faculty, you might as well do it for 17! How much more work can it be? As it happens, this particular set of indicators has resulted in considerable debate across the University.

PSO staff are also increasingly involved in providing training and information sessions to a wide range of University staff covering subjects across many of our activities. How the University is funded by DETYA; details of the University's budget; the dependence of the PSO on timely, accurate, consistent and complete data from University databases in order to provide the outputs expected of it; the significance of research performance in determining College funding; - all are the subject of regular communication between the PSO and other sections of the University. While some of this is designed to help us do our job better, much is designed to pre-empt questions that may be directed to us, or at least to educate our colleagues about where to come to find detailed answers to their specific questions.

8.CONCLUSION

Academic staff at the University of Sydney show by the questions that they address to the PSO that they are very conscious or their role as planners, and of the competitive environment in which they operate. Unfortunately, some are showing a tendency to allow resource considerations to dominate thinking about what should properly be academic decisions.

The PSO has a history of providing advice to academic planners, and of receiving positive feedback on the value and timeliness of such advice. As our reputation for sound, impartial advice grows, academic staff come to us with increasing frequency, recognising us as valued partners in assisting them in planning the efficient delivery of the core business of the University.