Chapter 3

The Virtual CSU:
A Leadership Model for Universities Transitioning to Online, Open, and Distance Delivery

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ABSTRACT

The Virtual CSU is a model of distributed leadership and team-based consultancy and support which has been implemented at Victoria University of Wellington over the last four years as part of an overall plan transitioning to greater use of online, open and distance provision of higher education. The model uses ideas drawn from industry to create flexible virtual teams that act as internal consulting teams. The resulting teams combine professional and academic staff from a variety of internal units into a semi-formal group focused on specific university projects, operational needs or strategic challenges in a way that avoids the costs of formal restructuring and that provides a mechanism for professional development and facilitation of wider changes in the capability of the university.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are typically characterised as unchanging places. The stereotypical university is a place of quiet scholarship disconnected from the frenetic pace of

change that characterises the commercial world. A moments consideration of the range of universities, from small liberal arts colleges teaching two-year associate degrees, through to large élite research universities such as Harvard and Oxford, to the various open universities with hundreds of thousands of students shows that the university is in reality a more diverse place than suggested by the stereotype.

The university is also strongly connected to society and heavily influenced over time by wider changes in the environment (Cunningham et al., 1997; Sporn, 1999; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Shattock, 2003; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Wissema, 2009). The increasing challenge of funding higher education at both the individual and national level is widely recognised. Other, interrelated, forces acting on the university include the scale and scope of education; the competing influences of a diverse group of stakeholders; the changing role and significance of qualifications; and, most visibly the impact of rapid and ongoing technological development.

Sociologist Martin Trow is widely recognised as providing a useful model that explains the underlying sociological forces responsible for elements of these forces acting on the university (Trow, 1973). Trow identified that the growth in the scale of education drove the creation of three archetypal forms of education – élite, mass and universal. Élite education reflects a focus on "shaping the mind and character of a ruling class" (Trow, 2006, p. 243) as well as reflecting the "level of intensity and complexity at which the subject is pursued" (Trow, 1976, p. 355). As the scale of higher education grows to encompass a wider proportion of the population, the emphasis shifts to a focus on efficiency and impact on society most typically through employment and economic growth (Trow, 2006, p. 243). Initiatives such as the European Bologna process (Bergen, 2005; Bologna Declaration, 1999) and the alignment of national qualification frameworks to the European Qualifications Framework (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2015) reflect the action of mass education.

The final phase, universal education, is starting to become apparent in the development of open education resources and providers (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012) and the exploration of the MOOC and other forms of distance or online education by many established universities (Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013). The universal model refocuses on the individual student and reflects their needs, interests and energy: "attendance at emerging institutions of higher education designed for universal access is merely another kind of experience not quantitatively different from any other experiences in modern society that give one resources for coping with the problems of contemporary life" (Trow, 2006, p. 255).

The forces for change identified above can be explained and positioned by understanding the mix of these three modes operating simultaneously within a single institution, across a national system of provision or globally. Mass education drives

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