



Unscrambling the Egg – Reflections on a Successful University Change Project

The former department of Accounting and Finance in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Monash University had more staff and student load than most of the other Faculties at Monash and was by far the most profitable academic department in the University. The Faculty of Business and Economics was the University's "cash cow". The department was the cash cow's "cash cow". The department formed around the year 2000 following an external academic review and merged two broad disciplines – accounting and banking and finance. Arising from the recommendations of subsequent five year external reviews the merger was strengthened and the professional staffing structure professionalised and specialised with the addition of a Business Manager to replace the traditional Department Manager and the hiring of specialist professional staff providing expertise in e learning; information management and programming; accreditation and academic quality; simulation based learning. The department also had in place dedicated finance, human resources and marketing support.

In 2012 the five year external academic review recommended that the Department of Accounting and Finance should be split into two separate academic departments. It is worth noting that the external review team did not recommend how the two new departments would be structured nor did it make recommendations in relation to how the governance structure be set up nor how the departments would be administered. This latter issue was left to the Dean and the new Heads of Department to sort out. In October 2012 the Dean of the Faculty agreed to the separation recommendation and in June 2013, after having been approved by Faculty Board and Academic Board the formal proposal was put to and approved by the University Council.

The formal proposal indicated that the separation would be cost neutral and that there would be no extra professional staff and no diminution of revenue.

The Dean had indicated that the two departments will also have two separate administrative support units and put in place certain rules in relation to how those administrative support structures would be organised and relate to the Faculty service provision model. The "old" department had over the years developed a shared services model supporting the department's activities over 4-5 campuses as well as managing academic quality across its 2 international campuses.

The major challenge in setting up the new structures involved taking the existing administrative support structure and staff and separating it and then to create two independent organisational structures. I describe this challenge as akin to "unscrambling an egg" as the shared services Model with a range of specialist and generalist roles did not separate neatly. The project presented a leadership and strategic challenge for the new management team; and a workplace relations and change management challenge for all

department staff and the University. The restructure also had to occur within a severely constrained operating environment where staff recruitment was frozen; the faculty under pressure to cut professional staff numbers; an undertaking that budgets and staff classifications could not change plus the whole restructure taking place within an enterprise workplace agreement renegotiation and multiple restructure occurring within the University. In other words: “business as usual”!

As the Business Manager I was tasked with “unscrambling the egg” in such a way as to be compliant with the industrial relations agreements on workplace change; provide a logical transition path for staff into similar but new roles; accommodate the agreed financial and human resource constraints and address the Dean’s specific issues around service provision. The new structures also had to be logical and provide a solid foundation for supporting the new departments. In addition, the Faculty was planning for the creation of a new Business School within the existing Faculty structure and the organisation of the professional staff services to the new departments needed to be mindful of the likely impact of a future School administrative structure and the further centralisation of service provision occasioned by the school model.

Whilst the planning and approval phase of the separation was undertaken the perception of the two staffing cohorts –the academic staff and the professional staff- were quite diverse and became a challenge for management to deal with as the two cohorts were, apparently, at significantly different stages of the change spectrum.

This paper will reflect on the challenges and strategies that the Steering Committee used to ensure the best outcome for all.