

# Chapter 14

## The Experience of University of Western Sydney, Australia

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### 14.1 Introduction

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) is, in the Australian context, a young university. In 2014 it is also a large and increasingly prominent university with more than 42,000 students, continuing strong student demand, excellent student outcomes and high performing and highly regarded areas of research. The current success and prominence of UWS was made possible through the merger of its constituent colleges in 2,000. Where once it was a complex and contested federation, UWS is now a highly productive unified institution experiencing the benefits of fundamental and far-reaching change to its structure and organisation.

The University was established in the changing and challenging environment of Australian higher education of the late 1980s as three colleges of advanced education located in the large urban region of Western Sydney, were joined together to form the University of Western Sydney (UWS). An Act of Parliament formally creating the University prescribed a federated institutional structure in which each Member of the federation (the former colleges) retained a large degree of autonomy while working within the planning and resource allocation framework of the University at large. Each Member institution operated within its own academic and management structures.

In a hybrid culture of Member-centric planning and University-level monitoring and reporting it eventually became impossible to hold onto the status quo, whatever that meant. Change, therefore, became inevitable. This change took the form of a merger of the three Member institutions of the federation to form a unified multi-campus University with a single administration and academic structure. This process of institutional reform and reinvention was viewed within the Australian higher education sector as both overdue and a major and critical undertaking.

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The years since the merger have seen continuing and comprehensive organisational and cultural change – periods of major transformation as well as times of slow, often hard-won and incremental adjustments, consolidation and realignment, but within the context of a unified institution.

The organisational structure created by the merger provided the resources required for the University to focus on both quality (*excellence*) in teaching, research and community service and on widening participation in higher education (*opportunity*). The standing and achievements of UWS in the past decade would not have been possible without the merger and through this the creation of a united, more efficient and purposeful institution.

The UWS experience of organisational transformation had its origins in the initial federated structural form of the University, its legislative charter, the nature and aspirations of its founders and the experiences and expectations of its communities, students and staff. It represents an institutional response to the changing dynamics within higher education locally, nationally and internationally and most importantly to the inefficiencies and lost opportunities of the University's first decade.

## 14.2 National Context

In 1987 the Australian Government proposed a seismic shift in the structure and form of the national higher education landscape. At that time the sector was characterised by two layers of institutions, often referred to as the “binary divide” – where (1) a small number of universities (19) were funded to conduct teaching and research across a wide domain of academic interests and activity; and (2) a larger number of colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology were funded to teach in professionally-oriented programs but received little dedicated Government funding for research.

The reforms created a new Australian higher education system and the 36 universities (now 39) which formed, at that time, the “*Unified National System*” were to benefit from more advantageous and open resourcing arrangements and a share of the planned growth in the system. Under the Government's arrangements for this new system, institutions were to be “*funded on the basis of merit and achievement rather than historical precedent and arbitrary classification*”.<sup>1</sup> The distinctions between universities and colleges and institutes that had determined the allocation of funding for the previous 20 years was removed and institutions were able to determine their strategic priorities and plans and to manage their own resources within a framework of reporting and accountability. To achieve the Government's objective of “excellence in higher education”, all institutions

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education, A Policy Statement, Commonwealth of Australia, 1987, p. 10 <http://www.voced.edu.au/print/content/ngv9695>

were encouraged to implement measures “*to be efficient, flexible and responsive to changing national needs*”.

Those institutions wishing to continue to operate within this unified system were required to commit to certain internal management, staffing and credit transfer arrangements as well as to a common academic year. All institutions were required to be of a certain size (fulltime student load of at least 2,000) or to merge with other like institutions. These new directions for the nature, size and operations of the higher education sector did not go uncontested and there was a torrent of protest from some universities and smaller colleges. With the requirements for change tied to funding, the outcomes of the Government’s new policy for the sector included:

- a range of institutional mergers and amalgamations;
- a deliberate emphasis on greater diversity within the sector;
- improved educational equality and a commensurate opening up of university education to a wider section of the community; and
- a trend for institutions to modernise to meet the challenges of the international education market and the growing expectations of students.

In the years that followed the unified national system of Australian universities continued to grow and flourish. During the early 1990s the Government provided significantly increased funding to support and gain acceptance of the new system. Many institutions grew dramatically and increased the reach and status of their academic programs and research.

By the end of the first decade of the unified system the election of a new Government saw the previous rapid growth in funding dramatically slowed. Institutions faced more difficult and constrained financial times and increasing competition as the Australian Government sought to reduce its investment in higher education (or at least to slow the rate of growth of government funding). In this more challenging and financially insecure period universities could no longer simply continue as they had always done. These times called for innovation, collaboration, a focus on institutional efficiency and the garnering of resources from non-traditional sources.

The Government managed very closely the growth in student numbers with students required to contribute more and more to the costs of their education as the debate about the private and public benefits of higher education continued unabated. There were notable reviews of the Australian higher education sector, the Australian Government “Crossroads” reforms in 2004/2005 and the Review of Higher Education in 2008. What was increasingly apparent was that universities could not rely on Government funding or student contributions to wholly fund their growth or to improve and increase their research efforts. The clarion call was for institutions to be more efficient and to find other sources of revenue to support their strategic goals and priorities. Competition and collaboration were, at any given time, uneasily juxtaposed in the lexicon of higher education. Institutional strategies, performance and achievements saw the fortunes of some universities plummet while others went from strength to strength gaining international recognition for the quality and reach of their academic programs and research.

## 14.3 Institutional Context

For many years Western Sydney was regarded as the less developed region of the Sydney basin. Those in the west who wanted to go to university and had the chance to do so had to leave home or commute for several hours a day. The promise of a university that served the region, was comprehensive and respected, held the hopes of many. The first movement to establish a university in the region, in fact, pre-dated the reforms that created the unified national system.

Established in 1989, UWS was an amalgamation of three institutions (colleges of advanced education) with a legislative charter to provide high quality higher education and research at six quite different and geographically dispersed campuses in Greater Western Sydney (GWS), a region of almost 9,000 square kilometres with a population approaching two million people. The University was created as a federation with a central coordinating and steering core, the University “Headquarters”, and three Member institutions – UWS Hawkesbury, UWS Nepean and UWS Macarthur.

The Act of Parliament that established the University is unusual in the Australian context as it specifically requires a focus on the “*needs and aspirations*”<sup>2</sup> of the community and residents of GWS and on the contribution the University should make to the economic and social development of that region.

The University has an international reputation for its engagement with the communities it serves and for its mission to bring the highest quality educational opportunities to the people of GWS – a region of historical under-provision of opportunity and areas of significant educational disadvantage. In 2007, the University was recognised by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) as a “*University of the people*”. Importantly, as a young university, UWS does not have the historical depth of experience in teaching, research and relationships with business and industry that characterise an established and older university. It also does not have the accumulation of assets, endowments and resources that older universities derived from periods of generous public funding (at national and state levels).

### 14.3.1 Rationale for the Merger

The prospect of amalgamating the three Member institutions had been considered at the University’s formation in 1989 during the period of the development of the unified national system in which many institutions did merge to form, or be part of larger universities. Such an amalgamation was not possible at this time due to the pace at which the Government reforms were being implemented and the need to overcome the strong institutional allegiances of each of the colleges, both within the staff and student communities and in their local regional communities. The federated structure was the only achievable outcome at this time.

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<sup>2</sup>University of Western Sydney Act, 1988 – Legislation of the New South Wales Parliament, Australia [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol\\_act/Uowsa1997375/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/Uowsa1997375/)

In the early years of UWS the constituent “Members” operated much as they had always done and with the legislative authority to manage their own affairs with minimal influence or accountability to the University “Headquarters”. As a result, the management and leadership of the University were predominantly dependent on formulaic planning and resourcing, maintaining the status quo, and inevitably looking inwards.

The federated structure of the University, after a short period of operation, however, became increasingly problematic and the first decade of the University’s life (1989–1998) was beset by internal competition, inefficiencies and an inability to act in concert for the good of the University as a whole, as the three Member institutions concentrated on and promoted their own priorities and aspirations. The University lacked an achievable collective purpose with each Member institution marching to the beat of its own drum.

During this period the concept of all-of-institution strategic planning was often seen as inimical to the interests of the Member institutions. So overwhelming was the influence of the divergent visions of the Members that discussions of a University-wide mission statement took more than 2 years to resolve. The role of the University’s “Headquarters” became one of a broker of some form of compromise on planning issues rather than leadership of institutional discussions of an overarching strategy for the future. This often resulted in an outcome framed by the lowest common denominator and not what was actually in the best interests of the University and the region it serves. Funding was allocated on the basis of a formula reflecting the relative sizes of the Members as they were in 1989, and, as growth occurred, this formula entrenched the historic differences and resource disparities across the University.

Western Sydney is a diverse region and the regional communities proximate to each of the University’s campuses had developed strong allegiances to and support of their local Member institution. This was of considerable significance in the process to garner acceptance of any University-wide development and to increase the engagement of these communities in the life of the University as a whole.

While the federation continued to be a major impediment to fundamental and vital developments within the University, to improving institutional performance and to taking advantage of national policy and funding initiatives, there is no doubt that each Member institution maintained a passionate intentionality to contribute to the development, support and future of their own local communities.

The possibility of merging the Members of UWS was again contemplated in 1995 but for different reasons. It had become obvious that change was needed – as the cracks in the federation were becoming quite clear. Staff members working within the Member institutions were becoming more entrenched and it was often easier to work with another university than with colleagues within UWS. The debate at this time arose from a very public attempt by one of the three Members, UWS Nepean, to withdraw from the federation.

The leaders of UWS Nepean had been encouraged and given strength by some local political supporters and buoyed by arguments about the dysfunctionality of the tri-partite Member structure. The determination of the UWS Nepean President, the support of this Member’s Academic Board and most senior leaders and the

reality that UWS Nepean was the largest of the three Members fuelled the efforts to break away from the federation. Countering this and following a groundswell of support for the University from many segments of the community, Government, staff and students, the University’s governing body, the Board of Governors, withstood the move by UWS Nepean.

The State Minister for Education was a particularly important player who supported the preservation of the University in its federated form. An external review was established in mid-1995 with a high profile Committee entrusted with the responsibility to advise on the most appropriate response to the issues raised by UWS Nepean and to formulate structural arrangements which would not only allow the University to continue to operate, but to grow and develop in the ways anticipated on its formation in 1989. The outcome was a strengthened federation with a more substantial role for the central core of the University and the creation of Member Councils as new elements of the governance framework of UWS. Importantly, at this time, the University determined to retain the federated structure in the full knowledge that it was a more costly model of operation than a university of similar size and scope with a unitary academic and administrative structure (Fig. 14.1).

At a University-wide level there were formal opportunities for discussions regarding the development of the University as a whole. The University governance structures involved:

- the Chairs of the Member Councils being members of the University’s Board of Trustees<sup>3</sup> and Deputy Chancellors of the University;
- Member Presidents/Deputy Vice-Chancellors meeting with the Vice-Chancellor through the Vice-Chancellor’s Management Advisory Group; and
- staff of the Members coming together to discuss academic matters as part of the processes of the University’s Academic Board.

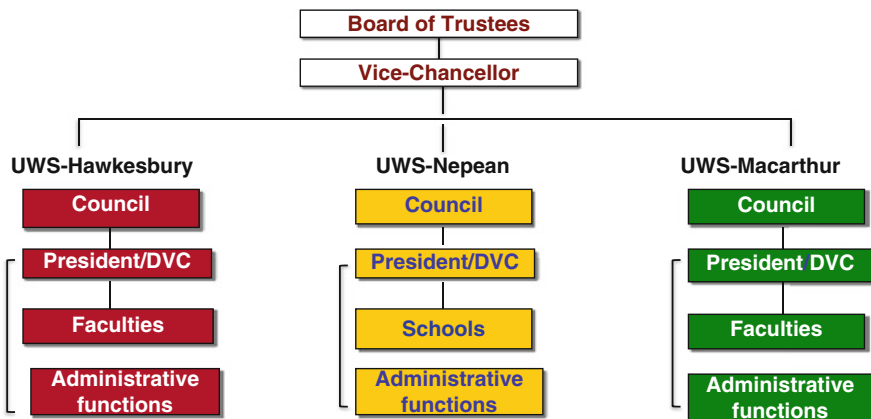


Fig. 14.1 The UWS federated structure, 1996–1999

<sup>3</sup>The name of the governing body of the University was changed under the amendments to its enabling Act in 1997 and the Board of Governors became the Board of Trustees.

This experience and related governance structures, however, were not sufficient to genuinely unify the University and there remained trenchant opposition to effective cooperation and to working as productive institutional colleagues. In regular annual reporting to the Australian Government, required of all universities, it was noted that UWS was not performing adequately in a number of domains and was not meeting the generally expected level of financial performance.

After a further 3 years of operation of this strengthened federated structure, a new Vice-Chancellor took office in 1998 with a mandate to take the necessary steps to ensure the University could realise its purpose and promise in the region and in this context to address the inter-institutional divides that continued to hold back parts of the University. For the first time staff members could question what they did, how they did it and why the University had not done more as a collective institution.

The approach of this time was encapsulated by Burton Clark<sup>4</sup> who wrote in 1998: *“With complexity and uncertainty now endemic, no one knows with any degree of confidence what the twenty-first century holds in store for universities. How then to proceed? One answer stands out: step by step, learn by experimenting. We need widespread experimentation that tests ways to move into the future.”*

## 14.4 Towards a Merger

The process to finally unify the University started modestly in 1998 with discussions of sharing services and of developing an active and strategic vision for the institution as a whole. A group of 28 projects under the rubric of *Agenda 2000* was developed and staff commenced the first conversations about how they might work better together. The ringing response was that the University’s structure and operation really didn’t make sense and were built on boundaries and interests of another time. It was clear that the University was not reaping sufficient and sustainable benefits from its overall size and particular strengths in the new Australian higher education sector that comprised fewer, but larger, institutions. If UWS was to compete and prosper in that environment it had to change.

In late 1999, the Board of Trustees approved the Vice-Chancellor’s proposals for fundamental and institution-building change. These proposals were based on increasingly significant concerns over the costs of the federation and on the University’s reduced productivity and diminishing ability to take advantage of the potential for sector-wide growth. The proposal detailed in the plan, entitled the *“Shape of the Future”*, was that the Member institutions would merge to form

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<sup>4</sup>Clark, B. R. (1998), *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation*, IAU Press.

a unified multi-campus University with one administration and one academic structure. It outlined:

1. A blueprint for the unified UWS
2. The principles underpinning the new UWS; and
3. The implementation process.

It was recognised at the time that this merger and accompanying change process was one of the most significant to occur in Australia since the reforms that created the unified national system of higher education in the late 1980s. The objectives, as outlined in the “*Shape of the Future*” of the unification of the University were to:

- improve the quality of services and educational experience for all stakeholders, particularly students;
- provide these services in a coordinated and cost effective way building on all elements of best practice;
- provide a supportive, energising and rewarding working environment for academic and general staff recognising creativity, intellectual rigour and academic excellence;
- allow the University to better manage a very tight and deteriorating budgetary situation;
- establish an operating environment which gave the University the administrative flexibility to respond to the rapid changes in the external environment and allowed it to seize strategic competitive opportunities; and
- develop a united UWS image and direction in ways which added value to its international reputation, competitiveness and standing.

The University’s unified structure was to comprise:

- **Four academic colleges** – and a nested set of schools based on the most appropriate and productive discipline groupings; and
- **Four administrative and academic support divisions** in which all of the functions to support the core activities of the University, its staff and students would be organised.

Fundamental to this process was the anticipation, endorsed by the Board of Trustees, that there would be savings found, or generated from the merger, amounting to at least 10 % of the total costs of the administrative and support areas of the University. This resulted in a savings goal of \$10 million (AUD) per annum (in an annual budget for these areas in 2000 of \$100 m and for the University overall of \$300 m). These savings were seen as vital to arrest a certain and serious decline of the University’s financial position which would likely lead to a deficit result within 2 years. One key rationale for the merger was that the Australian Government had examined the structure, operations and income generating capacity of the University in 1998 and had declared it as an institution at “financial risk” (Fig. 14.2).

In this sense, many within UWS and the sector believed the proposed merger was 10 years too late. While other universities had amalgamated in 1989 when



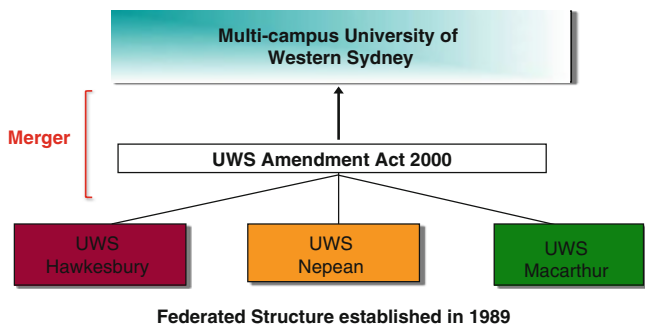


Fig. 14.2 The University structure following the merger

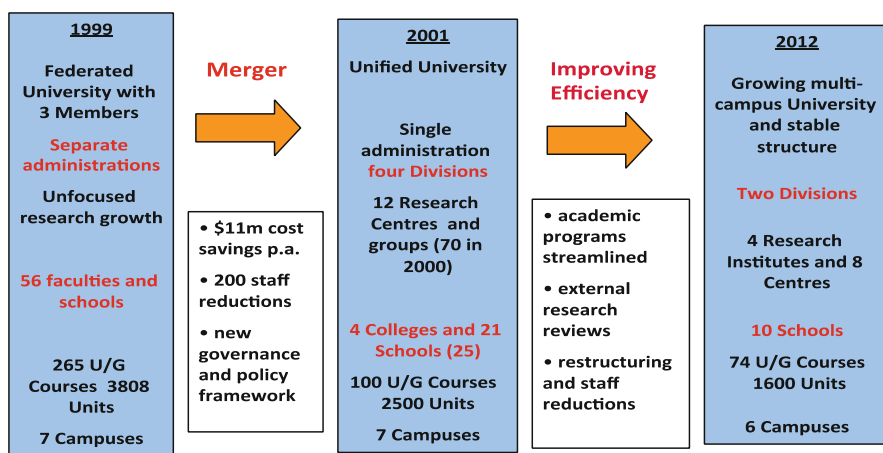


Fig. 14.3 The University of Western Sydney: a decade of change

university funding was growing for all, UWS did not take the opportunity to amalgamate to create a single institution. A decade later, therefore, it was forced to implement significant institutional change and save money at the same time. This was clear for all to see, but was, nevertheless, both uncomfortable and contested. The University community at large knew that it would be a tumultuous time that, while unavoidable, would involve radical change, uncertainty and escalating levels of risk (Fig. 14.3).

### 14.5 The Merger Process and Structure

Once the Board of Trustees made the decision to merge the three Members into a unified institution (with an integrated organisational structure), it became essential to establish a dedicated project management framework to operate alongside the

“business as usual” activities of the University. A small office led by a senior project manager was created together with a complementary governance structure supporting the University’s senior staff in designing, testing and implementing the proposed new organisational structure and arrangements.

At a University-wide level there were five pivotal groups:

An overarching *Implementation Steering Committee* (comprising the University Executive, Executive Deans, staff and student representatives) which guided the process and was supported in its work by four committees dealing with supplementary detailed costing and benchmarking, student consultation, staffing and communication. These were:

- A *Staffing Committee* – dealing with all the issues affecting staff and developing an agreed process for change. After 3 months of negotiation with the staff Unions the *Staffing Paper* was agreed and was then used to underpin the staffing arrangements for the merger.
- A *Benchmarking Committee* – which rigorously costed every unit of administration, then worked with staff to reshape the units on a new, lower funding base reflecting the merging of like activities and the impetus within these arrangements to implement new and efficient all-of-University structures, systems, processes and policies.
- A *Student Consultative Committee* which discussed with students the proposals for change and sought their feedback, which wherever possible was included.
- A *Communication Committee* – which was to develop the means by which the University could consistently and often advise the community about the merger, the proposals for change and any other information to allay concerns. This included UWS-all emails, newsletters, a dedicated website, campus forums, community discussions, meetings with students and staff and their representative bodies and meetings of the Board of Trustees and the University’s peak academic governance group, the Academic Senate (Fig. 14.4).

### ***14.5.1 The University’s Administrative and Academic Support Structure***

Each of the emerging organisational divisions also had a change management group supported by a dedicated project manager. Below this structure was a series of 30 staff work teams. In total more than 300 staff were involved in the design process for the new organisational structures and arrangements. These groups were, in reality, designing the new administrative and academic support structures while at the same time endeavouring to lead and manage a very large and complex institution.

The principal objective of each of the teams designing the newly unified institution was to ensure the most effective, efficient and productive structure based on the extensive input from staff in these areas and identified best practice



**Fig. 14.4** Implementation process – management and governance

within the context of the University's own particular circumstances and strategic priorities. Throughout the following year (2000) every unit of the administration was carefully examined and fully costed. The project teams worked with staff to reshape the units to a new, lower funding base for current activities but also with the possibility of additional resources in areas where the merger allowed for new ideas to be implemented or where the former structure had inhibited development. In this complex matrix of organisational design, the working groups were charged with the responsibility to think about, research and benchmark innovative and optimal structures and arrangements for the "new" integrated and unified UWS.

The project teams, in the main, comprised representative staff from each of the Members with responsibility for or working within the area under consideration or staff from units interacting with or requiring the services of the unit being reviewed. These groups worked with staff from the change management team which had the responsibility to benchmark comparative structures and processes, identify models of best practice and to develop an understanding of current costs and potential efficiencies.

All 59 senior and executive positions were abolished and 28 created in their place for which senior staff were required to compete. In general, each of the Member institutions had a similar position to the one being filled within its leadership structure. For example, there were three Registrars, three Librarians, three Directors of Finance across the University with only one being required in the new unified structure. All leadership positions were advertised internally and any staff member with the requisite skills and experience was able to apply. As these senior leadership roles were progressively filled the cascade of the next level of appointments took place, most by transfer from old to new, and some by competition if there was more than one eligible applicant for a job. This process was

arduous, complex, contested and took the best part of a year, primarily, to ensure it was fair, consistent and transparent and proceeded stepwise through the institution. Over 900 administrative staff had to be individually considered and consulted, and either compete for new positions, be “placed” or be offered a redundancy. In the event, 100 staff left the University, with significant costs in severance payments.

Overall the University, in fact, saved \$11 m per annum in administrative costs from the merger. This proved to be a vital outcome as the University battled a continuing decrease in its funding from the Government arising from sector-wide changes.

### ***14.5.2 The University’s Academic Structure and Operations***

In the University’s federated structure the Members had quite different approaches to the organisation of their academic structures. This led to the University having 56 separate academic units (faculties or schools) at the time of the merger, which had, over the previous decade, been in some form of competition with each other. These had not managed to come together to form a critical mass in either their teaching programs or in research development.

Given the history and the intensity of academic staff feelings about their discipline areas, the University believed it was important that they be directly and significantly involved in the process to develop the academic groupings that would be implemented for the merger and underpin the new academic college structure.

A change management process was developed in which the four proposed University-wide colleges designed broadly around arts, science, business and health, were notionally established and a leadership and project management team, the *College and Schools Formation Facilitation Team* was put in place to manage the development of the next layer of academic structures. Over 1,000 academic staff members were asked to propose and choose a group of academic colleagues, or a discipline grouping, that best matched their academic interests. This process was at times marked by vigorous debate and disciplinary demarcation disputes but was transparent as academic staff were given the right to choose their future school or college within guidelines developed in consultation with staff, unions and the Board of Trustees.

In the early years of the University its research efforts were unfocused and lacked a coherent all-of-institution strategy. Academic staff who were engaged in research often sought to work on projects external to the University rather than to seek to find common interests with their own academic colleagues in one of the other Member institutions. By 1999 this situation had become an anchor to the broader research development of the University and became one of the drivers for organisational change. The organisational form and governance structures emerging from the merger process brought academic colleagues together in a variety of settings and led to greater focus and consolidation of the research enterprise.

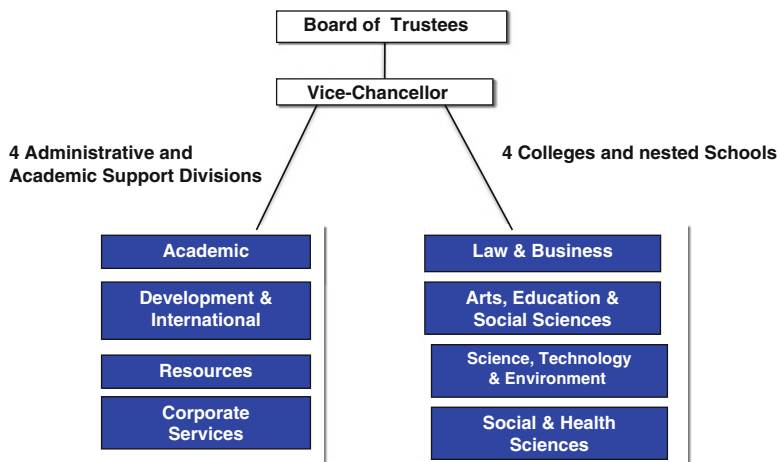


Fig. 14.5 A new UWS organisational structure – 2001

Soon after the merger was finalised (late 2001 and early 2002) the Vice-Chancellor commissioned an all-of-University external review of research, entitled the *Research Landscape Review* to provide the strategic framework to underpin a rapid development of the University's research. This was a pivotal step in creating the successful research strategy now in place at the University which has seen its performance and attraction of high quality research staff improved significantly (Fig. 14.5).

The schools formation process was intended to be a balanced “bottom up” and management guided endeavour. Twenty-eight submissions to form schools were developed. This led to 22 schools being nested within the four colleges replacing the existing 56 academic units.

The fledgling new schools immediately engaged in the urgent task of unpacking the 265 courses of the former Members and remaking them as 102 University-wide courses. At the same time 3,808 subjects currently available were initially reduced to about 2,500, and following a teach-out period, to about 1,600. All this had to be done within a period of 5 months in order to publish the course information for the 2002 academic year.

The changes and associated deadlines were relentless and many staff felt they had lost touch with their familiar networks of friendship, information sharing, assistance and collegiality. These together are the social fabric of an institution and the feelings of loss were apparent for some who had not reacted well to the merger. This sapped much of the goodwill and energy of staff who were tired of the pace and complexity of the changes.

Above all else the UWS process had to be iterative and adaptive. This required being honest about problems and inviting feedback on both the means and the desired outcomes. As problems and shortcomings became evident, so too did the solutions. A number of committees guiding the process were augmented by staff and student representation, additional forums were held on each campus to explain

the process and outline progress and a website was established to provide change documentation and to post frequently asked questions and answers. It was important to give a sense of the scale and scope of the change process, not only in terms of the overarching rationale and objectives, but also what it was intended to deliver structurally and the intensity and enormity of the work involved.

Overall the merger process in 1999/2000 involved more than 400 staff and students, in excess of 500 meetings and generated over 1,200 submissions, email messages and reports.

## 14.6 Progress and Outcomes

### 14.6.1 *The Impact of the Merger on Students of the University*

For students, recognition of the impact of the changes was slower and acceptance, at least by student leaders, took some time to occur. In many ways students were more resistant to the merger despite the potential benefits to them in terms of choice and increased quality in their courses. Current students had enrolled at one of the Member institutions and their loyalty to and recognition of the qualification from that institution was paramount to them as discussions of the merger commenced. This resistance was also due in part to timing as much of the early work happened when students were on vacation.

The student interest in the integration of the academic program and the influence of staff anxieties and reactions to the merger on student perceptions led to a series of public campaigns about aspects of the restructure, complaints regarding services and a general intensifying of expectations.

To some extent this reaction was overcome by establishing forums where students were advised of each change proposal and given the opportunity to comment through the Student Consultative Committee. There were many good ideas emerging from these consultations and plans were amended to include suggestions that would strengthen or improve earlier proposals.

Students, in general, focus their attention on their learning experience and are most often unaware of internal structures. They have a natural wish to improve campus experiences and to form friendships and networks with other students. Concerns they raised were normally related to ensuring good quality teaching, increased student support services, timely and relevant information provision and better food and social facilities. Three areas of significant activity and concern emerged in the student consultation process:

- the form of any new student association (one entity), given there were eight currently in existence across the three Members and whether the new association would be aligned with the new structure or in part reflect the old institutions. In this regard students were vocal in their insistence of “student control of student affairs”;

- ensuring equity of student service provision across the six campuses of the University; and
- any indication of changes to the content, location and delivery of the academic program.

The University's Board of Trustees, which included two elected student members, endorsed the establishment of a project team and process to review current student organisations and to propose a unified structure across all campuses. This was, by its very nature, a contested and complex process, that, at one stage, led to external legal action and a mediated resolution between the University and the student organisations. In time a new student organisation was formed and substantial funding, in the form of dedicated student fees paid by all students, was provided to allow this new student organisation to improve social, representative and collective student activities across UWS.

### ***14.6.2 The Response of the University's Staff to the Merger***

Given the extensive period of consultation during 1998/1999 leading up to the decision to merge the institution, the broad rationale and principles underpinning the restructure were, at least, understood and, most often, supported by a majority of staff and by the staff unions. There were, however, clear expectations of further and regular consultation as well as warnings about the mechanisms for change and their intention to closely monitor implementation. The unions provided the lens through which many staff members' views and anxieties could be expressed and transmitted to the University. It was both important and constructive for the process that such concerns, issues and ideas were brought to the University for consideration and resolution. The unions' involvement and voices were important to the acceptance of the various elements of the process and to the broader success of the implementation plan.

As part of a national industrial system all Australian universities enter into negotiations surrounding staff conditions and entitlements with staff unions to produce an "enterprise" or "collective" Agreement. These normally prescribe the employment environment for a period of around 3 years. At the same time as the merger was underway the University embarked on this regular cycle of negotiations of staff Agreements which would frame employment conditions for the next 3 years. Inevitably the development of these new staff Agreements became intertwined with the changes taking place and provided another arena for concerns to be worked through.

At this time, many other institutions throughout the sector were locked into drawn-out negotiations for their new Agreements. For UWS, the sector-wide disputes notwithstanding, the Agreements were closed in a space of about a year, which was shorter in comparison to many other universities.

### ***14.6.3 Communicating the Changes***

Much of the energy and momentum of the merger process emerged from the diverse and sometimes fraught discussions within the University community. The myriad of formal and informal conversations occurring across the institution provided a deeper level of insight, as well as more detailed engagement with issues and ideas, giving substance to the process and outcomes. Among the most challenging aspects of the process was how best to garner and incorporate the views of all who wished to comment or contribute, whilst at the same time ensuring realistic expectations of the outcome of this involvement. This required honest, up to date and objective information being provided about plans and progress.

There is no doubt, however, that notwithstanding the multitudinous forms of communication and invitations for comments and for the contribution of ideas, the University community still argued that more could have been done and that the need for meaningful communication was not always met.

A regular newsletter was developed to provide the latest information on what was happening, regular emails reporting on progress from the Vice-Chancellor were sent to all staff, consultation forums on different topics were held, visits to academic and administrative units by the Executive and Project Steering Team were conducted and calls for input into the varying stages of the project were made regularly. In addition there was a significant responsibility for communication in the governance structures of the University, including discussions at the Academic Committees of the Member institutions, within the sub-committees of the University's Academic Board and in the formal consultative processes between UWS management and the staff Unions.

Over time it became clear that where reservations persisted about the extent and effectiveness of the communication process, these were as much about a lack of acceptance of the information being provided as a failure in the process of communication. It was also due, in part, to the sheer complexity of the process and the time being taken to reach milestones or completion of the various elements of the projects underway.

### ***14.6.4 Themes and Principles Arising from the Changes to UWS***

It is more straightforward to detail the many activities encapsulated in the change process to bring about the merger, than to articulate objectively the themes and underlying principles of institutional change. The following messages arising from the UWS process of change are not new and resonate with the literature on change.



These were articulated in presentations<sup>5</sup> about the UWS merger in the immediate period of the change process and remain highly relevant now:

- the new vision of the University must be transformational and entail a re-examination of core values;
- economic and business considerations alone will not lead to successful change nor win the commitment of the University community;
- the twin pillars of reform are structural and cultural change;
- leadership and staff participation in tandem are critical to a sustainable new institution;
- the plan for the process must be adaptive and allow for new ideas and be mindful of current policy and sector-wide issues;
- those who lead at all levels must have clear plans for the process and for the institution and act at all times with integrity and respect for others;
- the change process should be informed by strategies to develop the capabilities of the institution and its people;
- the change process must be underpinned by an effective communication strategy; and
- the commitments and work of leaders at all levels of the University must engender trust, understanding and engagement in the process.

### ***14.6.5 Cultural Change***

In its first decade UWS did not have its own identity and sense of community, a collective purpose or the intentionality to develop a new culture or united vision. In 1999 the *Shape of the Future*, foreshadowed much needed cultural change alongside structural transformation. The intention was to bring about lasting changes to the shared ways of thinking, beliefs, values, processes and relationships within the UWS community. A unified culture took several years to emerge as the old ways of operating took time to be replaced by a collective will to achieve a shared vision for UWS. Once the significant disruptions to the University's operations had settled the UWS community came together to discuss and agree a united vision – articulated as “*Bringing Knowledge to Life*” in the region.

Any structure can be made to work if those involved wish to do so. Alternatively, the best structure will often fail without support. The UWS experience shows that cultural change takes time – measured in years, not months. Without a renewal of

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<sup>5</sup> For example: Vice-Chancellor's Helsinki paper – ref. Reid, J. 2001, Creating a new university: Re-invention and cultural change, paper presented at the seminar on “The Financing of Higher Education” Helsinki, Finland, August 2001, The Association of Nordic University Rectors' Conference; The Nordic Association of University Administrators; and the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education.

networks within any new structure, and an examination of policies and processes and the way things are done, fundamental and sustainable cultural change will not be achieved and staff will not feel part of their new environment.

### **14.6.6 Significance of the Merger**

As the University reflected on the merger, and of the further changes to the institution that flowed from it since then, it was evident that had UWS not unified it would have been unable to achieve its potential. Bringing the University together allowed its aspirations and strategic priorities to be captured in an institution-wide planning program beginning in 2006 in which a one-page institutional strategy was created. Revised for the period 2014–2016 the *Making the Difference strategy* specifies that UWS will:

1. Position for success in the higher education environment
2. Create a superior and engaged learning experience
3. Develop focused, relevant and world-class engaged research
4. Develop mutually beneficial engagement partnerships
5. Build organisational capacity

The merger brought structural and organisational disruption, but it created a revitalised and purposeful unified University aiming for the “*strategic flexibility and intelligent opportunism and a capacity to adapt rapidly to market, policy and funding shifts*”.<sup>6</sup> The 2007 audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) described UWS as a university which had “*built a robust policy framework, and structures and systems are now capable of sustaining the integrated University well into the future*”, noting that “*UWS is now in a position to move forward with confidence*”.

## **14.7 Some Lessons from the UWS Merger Process**

In any merger a robust and well-communicated process of change is fundamental to success. A well-constructed process removes issues of bias, lack of transparency and anxieties about the impact on areas of the University and on staff and students. While the UWS merger is unique to its circumstances it is one that will have resonance for other institutions thinking about a new organisational form or of

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<sup>6</sup> Presentation to the Board of Trustees, 2005, Professor Janice Reid, Vice-Chancellor – in *Expect the Unexpected*.

garnering the collective strength of like-minded institutions. Some of the key lessons from the UWS are:

### 1. **Present a vision for the Merger**

There must be a well articulated and widely publicised vision for the merger underpinned by a clear and well-argued rationale and plan which complements institutional goals. The UWS experience showed that people would generally support the changes as these unfold if the merger has been explained and they see a sense of purpose accompanied by well developed, robust and fair process to achieve what is planned. The community understood that UWS would not achieve its mission unless institutional inefficiencies and blockages were removed and clear steps were taken to unify.

### 2. **Ensure all areas are considered in the change process**

All areas of activity should be reviewed in an evidenced-based way for effectiveness and suitability in the proposed structure. It also is important to acknowledge that the initially planned approach may actually not always be the best. Members of the University community (academic and professional staff and students) need to believe that they are genuinely valued and their opinions are important. This will engender commitment and support.

### 3. **Implement a comprehensive communication plan**

Any change process of the significance and reach of the UWS merger requires a relentless emphasis on frequent and honest communication at all levels of the institution. Staff, students and the community need to know what is planned and what will happen through tailored and targeted messages that are regular, truthful and open. The community will engage with the merger if they understand the process, are being kept informed and that any feedback received will be taken seriously. While this level of communication takes time and comes at a cost, it is a fundamental part of any successful change process. More importantly the merger will inevitably fail if genuine attention is not given to this aspect of the process.

This approach to communication and to the recognition that the flow of feedback and information was often instrumental in achieving better outcomes, provided a sense of flexibility in the process, which was not only essential, but led staff and students to believe that their input was genuinely valued and considered.

### 4. **Manage the pace of the change**

Once the rationale and plan for the merger process is developed, approved and promulgated it is important to ensure staff and students are aware of the timeline and any changes to it. The pace of change will have a significant impact on the acceptance of what is planned or being implemented. Staff and potentially student anxiety increases with uncertainty over time and, therefore, it is critical to make and implement hard decisions early, starting at the top.

### 5. **Appoint change leaders**

Identifying and appointing leaders of the process is vital when implementing major structural or cultural change. At UWS real progress was only made once the new team of senior managers was in place to lead the process. The new

senior management team should be there to design and implement the new structure. This leadership must behave with integrity, be authentic and open. The senior leadership team should, act in line with institutional values, be truthful about what is valued, respect others and admit mistakes.

**6. Provide the necessary resources for the merger process**

Effective change requires sufficient resources, either dedicated project management teams or staff released to be part of the process. The change process will only co-exist productively with “business as usual” when there are clearly identified teams for both activities and each is equally resourced and valued.

**7. Use the merger process to improve the way things are done**

The merger process provides the opportunity not only to bring about new structural arrangements but also to redesign and optimise administrative processes and workflow. While taking steps to map and refine or reshape the way things are done will take time and additional resources, the returns will be substantial. These benefits are twofold –one will be the positive response from staff involved in the process and the second is the potential for new ideas from staff about how to do things better. This also allows staff to see consultation as fruitful and to be encouraged to seek out best practice.

**8. Benchmark costs of current operations and proposed new arrangements**

The UWS experience showed that a thoroughgoing review and costing of existing operations paved the way for meaningful consideration of proposed new structures and for savings to be identified. In this work it is critical to ensure tight control of operating costs as the change process unfolds. It is equally important to set in place mechanisms to monitor and manage the costs associated with the implementation and operation of the new arrangements once these are established.

**9. Design the academic structure and program in a principled and objective way**

The academic program (the suite of undergraduate and postgraduate course that the University offers to its students) frames the University’s attractiveness and relevance to students as well as being critical to the University’s reputation. Equally important is the way in which academic staff members are clustered within a new academic organisational structure. To ensure the success and productivity of a merger it is vital to take a proactive, logical and, where necessary, prescriptive approach to designing the academic organisational structure and program and to minimise the influence of personal and political self-interest on academic decisions.

## **14.8 Conclusion**

The University of Western Sydney was established with a clear mandate to provide the highest quality higher education opportunities for the people of Western Sydney and to contribute to the development of a region with lower rates of participation in

higher education and with a long history of social and economic disadvantage. The region is also one of the most rapidly growing areas in Australia, and, therefore, the University focused the hopes and aspirations of its communities on the transformational power of education and on the importance of research in its regional context.

The University's early years were characterised by inefficiency, contested expectations and the lack of progress arising from its organisation as a federation of three relatively autonomous Member institutions. This led to a growing, and eventually inescapable, momentum for change. This change took the form of a merger of the constituent institutions into a unified and integrated structure.

The years since the merger have seen the University grow dramatically and to build its reputation as a high quality, engaged and purposeful institution. There is no doubt that without the merger the University of Western Sydney would not have achieved the progress it has in recent years, nor would it be on its current trajectory to be even more influential, successful and highly regarded in Australian and international higher education.

The merger was challenging to the students, staff and leaders of the University and, for a time, caused uncertainty within local communities. The comprehensiveness of the merger and related processes cannot be overstated. Consistent attention to detail and to the principles underpinning the work being undertaken to bring about a new structure was critical to long-term institutional sustainability and success. Such fundamental change processes create instability but also, when pursued confidently and against a clear and reasoned rationale, will bring about the institutional change required to provide for a successful future. This was the case for the University of Western Sydney.

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