

Strategically thinking – the next five years

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I was recently asked to develop a strategic plan/strategic intent for a small HE provider in Melbourne Australia based on a four-year projection – to be realized at the end of the fifth year. In order to develop a decent projection – a great deal of pondering took place as I grappled with the various conditions and scenarios that were ahead (many unknown) – realizing that what I was actually doing was essentially *guesswork* – and based on an optimistic mindset that said *growth will occur – and the rest will fall into place*.

I had written a couple of short pieces on the topic prior to developing the current scheme, see –

Whateley (2024) – Strategically Thinking -

musicum20.com/files/ugd/6113ad_d5adbeaa793e400dbe95d36f97983219.pdf

Whateley (2025) – Strategic Intent – knowing which was to go -

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Certainly, there was little doubt in my mind that **a plan was needed** – and even better a *genuine intent*. Inspired by Lewis Carroll (Alice in Wonderland) –

‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’

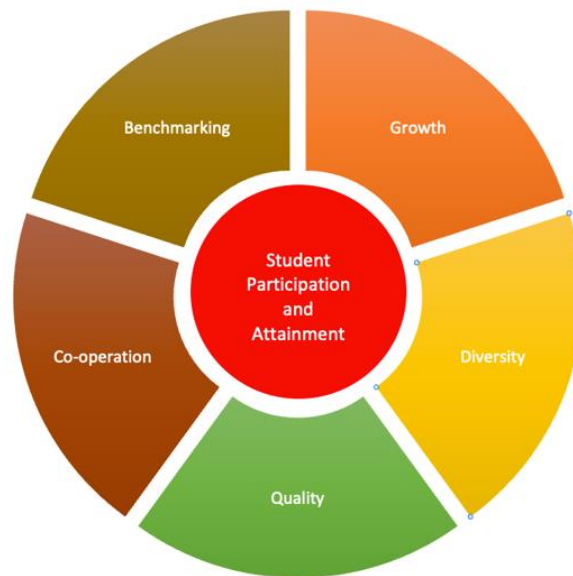
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where –” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.” –

clearly some kind of *focus* is essential – so with the intent to create some realistic (and softly optimistic) goals I established a *Strategic Intent* using a number of key ingredients including *growth, diversity quality, cooperation* and *benchmarking* as the pillars and placing the focus on key performance indicators (KPIs) that I could clearly articulate and measure on an ongoing basis.

At the heart of any discussion should be the focus on students at the organisation (they are ‘the clients’ so to speak) and at the very heart of the enterprise. This central focus is captured accordingly –



This measurement and progress sharing is important to a range of stakeholders at the institution in question.

Growth

This section (domain) deals with programs, locations, student numbers and finances. With a view that good schools grow. Excellent schools manage this growth and ensure ongoing support for students and staff in the process. My projections were relatively simple – and incorporated the 2024 data that could be sourced –

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Programs	1	2	3	4	5
Locations	1	1	1	2	2
Students	4.5	75	150	225	300
Finances	Deficit	Deficit	Break even	Surplus	Surplus

Fundamental to the success of the plan is 'growth' – and much of that is dependent on the national regulator increasing the international capacity of the organisation (to 300 places) and successful marketing on the part of the larger family of companies. When making a range of predictions there is always a degree of uncertainty – especially in a volatile environment such as international higher education.

Diversity

This domain provides a focus on domestic and international student numbers, nationalities, undergraduate and postgraduate student balance. Good schools encourage diversity. Excellent schools energise this diversity and develop a range of activities that maximise quality and opportunity. Again, some meaningful metrics needed to be put in place –

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Domestic (%)	100	20	25	30	30
International (%)	0	80	75	70	70
Nationalities	5	5	8	10	12
Undergraduate (%)	100	90	80	80	75
Postgraduate (%)	0	10	20	20	25

The diversity will be significantly influenced by the growth of a post graduate presence – which in many ways changes the dynamic of the organisation. Certainly, formal course proposals have been put forward – and success will largely depend on the support from the national regulator.

I have always touted that a healthy business has some 10% of students at postgraduate level – the projections here are bold but feasible assuming regulator support.

The international market is complex – and a key ingredient is ensuring a balance (or at least a diversity) of source countries – and not be limited to a specific region. The last thing an international school needs is to be branded a certain 'nationality' – this works against so many essential principles. A diversity of 10+ countries is both doable and workable.

Additional metrics such as male/female balance are also useful – ideally 50:50. In the international environment the gender balance can be largely influenced by the source countries. This metric has not been formally incorporated.

Quality

Quality is about measuring full-time versus part-time staff, staff qualifications ensuring AQF+1, progression, attrition, completion, student satisfaction, staff satisfaction, student staff ratio (SSR) and other external/independent survey scoring. Good schools monitor KPIs. Excellent schools use the data collected to continuously improve and reshape. Meaningful (and achievable) goals have been established -

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Full time staff (%)	35	35	35	40	40
AQF+1 (%)	100	100	100	100	100
Progression (%)	NA	80	80	80	80
Attrition (%)	NA	20	20	20	20
Completions (%)	80	85	85	80	80
Student Satisfaction/5	4.54	4	4	4	4
Staff Satisfaction/5	3.77	4	4	4	4
Student Staff Ratio (SSR)	1.5	15	20	25	30
SES (QILT) Aggregate	NA	National Average	National Average	National Average	National Average

A number of these measures are 'regulator driven' and often do not mean much (SSR and attrition for example) but are often called upon for risk assessments – so useful to keep the data. The real strength (or wellness) of the organisation is to do with issues such as progression, completions, as well as student and staff satisfaction.

This data is extremely useful for benchmarking purposes. It is tangible, empirical and does give some insight into key quality issues – and specifically student progression and satisfaction levels.

Cooperation

This domain considers adjuncts, fellows, national and international partners, national and international projects. Good schools consider co-operative activity. Excellent schools embrace it and ensure that it is initiated and maintained as part of the essential corporate identity.

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Adjuncts and Fellows	0	5	10	15	15
National Partners	1	1	2	3	4
International Partners	4	4	5	7	8
National Projects	1	1	2	3	3
International Projects	2	2	2	3	3

All the measures are focussed on developing national and international profile – best achieved through co-operative ventures or – *friends*. Having the opportunity to connect locally, nationally and internationally is vital for profile and currency. Adding adjuncts to the staffing profile also enhances the perception – this is also further enhanced through involvement in a range of projects.

Joining consortia is a most useful way of developing connections and co-operative initiatives locally, national and internationally.

Benchmarking

This domain encompasses partners, internal and external surveys, graduate surveys, grade distribution comparisons, peak body surveys and independent surveys. Good schools reflect. Excellent schools actively reflect and compare internally and externally and use the comparisons for continuous improvement.

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
Partners	2	3	5	7	9
Internal Surveys/year	0	3	3	3	3
External Surveys/year	0	1	2	3	3
Graduate Surveys/year	3	1	1	1	1
Grade Distribution Comparisons	0	3	5	7	9
Peak Body Surveys	0	1	1	1	1
QILT surveys	NA	1	1	1	1

If you truly want to understand yourself and know your true meaning – benchmark. That is ensure you measure yourself against ‘like organisations’ – preferably better than yourself. By sharing data and in turn being able to compare – you gain a true and informed self-assurance mechanism – giving rise to continuous improvement.

A vital tool

A strategic intent is a vital tool for many reasons -

- The KPIs provide tangible and measurable items that can be displayed for various stakeholders including Corporate and Academic governance bodies, staff, supporters – and of course regulators.
- Itemising the domains and sub elements gives the opportunity to focus on what is important to the organization and how it can be measured.
- Five focus domains are doable and practical.
- The language of the strategic intent is clear and evident – avoiding confusion or incorrect focus.

The very exercise of developing a strategic intent has been a useful exercise in itself, and judging from the level of support received to date will be a well-used and useful tool moving forward. I often use the nautical phrase – ‘steady as she goes’ (an order for a helmsman to keep a ship’s current course) in that it implies a thoughtful approach to the five domains – not a mad rush to achieve all the outcomes as soon as possible. A three to four-year approach is wise – and regular reviewing against the targets/KPIs should be put in place

across the organisation and articulated at every possible opportunity. The KPIs are an 'ALL of organisation' issue – not simply leadership performance demands. To achieve the desired outcomes – ALL staff need to be actively involved and committed.

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