Moving beyond Busyness. Issues Paper.

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At its November meeting, Academic Senate began a discussion about busyness. To further that discussion we have produced this issues paper, which suggests a diagnosis of the causes of busyness, and possible ways to alleviate it. A separate solutions paper suggests one possible, more detailed way forward.

What can we learn from reviewing the literature about Busyness?

We have begun with the assumption that busyness:

a) overwhelms the capacity of staff to meaningfully work towards improving student learning, teaching and research;
b) allows for little *agency* among staff, beyond responding according to pre-determined indicators and timelines, and this is seen to have a deleterious effect on creativity and collegiality;
c) is focused heavily on 'compliance' rather than 'quality';
d) generates confusion at many levels about the relationship between multiple strategic initiatives and operational activities;
e) seems to require frequent meetings, communiqués 'downwards' and reports 'upwards', so there is difficulty in scheduling, preparing for and participating in actual changes for improvement. In addition, it seems clear that
f) to address busyness we need to collectively review our goals, tasks and timelines and make some changes to the ways we are working.

It is clear that *busyness* is an issue for research into corporate management and productivity, though it is often seen as a *time management* problem that individuals need to solve. Suggested solutions are often about better scheduling, better meeting practice, delegation of tasks, better planning, and so on. Much of this research does not focus on *how* or *why* time came to be in short supply, but instead takes that as given in a culture of continuous change (Finnie & Usher 2005). But Martin (2010) argues, however, that when *busyness* becomes endemic and normalised, a management/worker division starts to be produced. Talk of 'us' and 'them' replaces 'we' as the emotional centre of institutional life, and people begin to become cynical about change. The common idea that 'management' can improve organisational culture is symptomatic of this sort of divided work effort.

Earlier Hot Topic papers have critiqued the hierarchical exercise of power in university systems, yet we often forget that Senate is itself a hierarchical power structure. Senate is established under the University's Act (Government of NSW, 1989). It has delegations and has the right to impose academic policy and workload on the university. And this makes questions about management versus governance a bit paradoxical, because CSU Academic Senate was deliberately set up to avoid that distinction by making the management key members of the Senate. Management *versus* governance in that context makes little sense, because governance involves

mostly the same people playing both roles (or wearing different 'hats'), as our Agenda cover sheet reminds us at every meeting. As research suggests, an engaged quality culture must involve *all* staff, working on the same problems together, because quality only happens with this sort of collective focus (Finnie & Usher, 2005; Martin, 2010; Bosidy et al., 2011; Denison & Nieminen, 2014; Dorrigo et al. 2015). This means that management and governance must work *interdependently* for organisations to function properly: the research shows that the *severing of interdependence* is the major cause of busyness.

It is quite possible for all of us, as members of CSU's governance committees, for example, to use the opportunity that the HESF provides to be open and clear about what we all *need* to do, and begin to treat our interactions and work practices as if they *matter* for our collective, institutional (and personal) well-being. What if CSU takes leadership in the sector to develop our work practice as a rational and intelligent, networked community? Senate was able to see this ambition in the early contributions from SAVS and SOTE School Boards as they have begun already to try work out what might need to change the *busyness* of our work. As governance is intrinsically, a process designed to ensure the institution is making the best decisions it can, for students and staff, this topic is a fundamental responsibility of our academic governance committees at all levels.

We are asking all of us, members of academic, professional and management staff of CSU as an organisation, to 'reclaim' the agenda for academic governance as the *collective* venue for continuous improvement – working for *compliance* with the external HESF standards, and working beyond this to assure the best *quality* university experience we can offer. In this way quality is indeed defined as a process that is both desirable and realistic, and in line with TEQSA's national quality agenda. But the current 'busyness as usual' agenda, with its focus on meeting implementation targets as a disconnected matter of compliance or acquittal, needs to be rethought. As Finnie & Usher (2005, p. 16) argued, a model of continuous improvement must be addressed as a serious institutional commitment:

> *While this type of quality assessment may sound less rigorous than the benchmarking approach seen in KPIs, it is in fact a great deal more labour intensive at the institutional level as institutions have to devote significantly more resources to creating and analysing data on their own processes.*

As the SAVS School Board argues too, most academics want much more than the achievement of compliance-focussed KPIs from our work. It is clear that if we aim for quality we will achieve compliance without lowering our sights. And as was noted in the Senate discussion, we can learn a lot from examples where other workplaces have successfully diagnosed and substantially solved the issue of busyness.

The Hypothesis: avoiding the execution trap

The literature that informed the review of committees at CSU highlighted the fact that organisations with sophisticated meeting practices tended to have a simultaneous absence of *busyness*, as defined above. In all of the organisations reviewed, including vast multi-nationals of enormous complexity equalling or surpassing that of 21st

century universities, the key to eliminating *busyness* lay in understanding the relationship between *strategy* and *everyday operational work*. That relationship is the key both to an organisation operating smoothly with little busyness (and few meetings), and to the reverse. Organisations that have succeeded to counteract busyness recognised firstly that staff at *all* levels and components of an organisation need to act strategically, *all* of the time (Denison & Nieminen 2014). **They rejected the distinction between strategic and operational work.** The conceptual separation of strategy and implementation produces what Martin (2015) calls "the execution trap", where the institution:

> *[makes] a distinction between **strategy** as deciding what to do and **execution** as doing the thing that strategists decided. […] to create the desired distinction, we would have to define execution as choice-less doing. There are no choices to be made: just do it (whatever "it" happens to be).*

This is the situation that characterises *busyness*, and as Academic Senate discussed, it produces 'work-arounds', low-level compliance, and people 'lying low', 'not engaging' and feeling both cynical and unhappy in the workplace. These are all choices that disconnect our networked links rather than build and strengthen them. As Martin continues:

> *[…] calling some choices "strategy" and some "execution" is a fruitless distinction. In fact, it is worse than fruitless; it is the source of the observed problems with "execution." So if organizations experience "bad execution" it is not because they are bad at the discipline of execution. It is because they* **call** *it execution* (our emphasis).

This is what our discussion and the papers about Quality that Senate has received to date from School Board meetings have identified – that we seem to be falling into this 'execution trap' – where strategy and implementation have become separated, and are seen as the work of different parts of the organisation. Like many organisations we have tried to fill that (non-existent) gap with detailed planning, but producing and attempting to implement those plans has been one of the greatest drivers of busyness. The shift towards a more project-based approach in the draft new Strategy is a positive change, as it focuses attention more on individual tasks to be solved, rather than on organising the generic activity of the whole organisation in a 'boil the ocean' type of way (Denison & Nieminen, 2014). This topic-focused approach is also how management and governance work interdependently through formal governance committees across all of the issues impacting the organisation, not just those linked directly to the Strategy.

The language of KPIs and acquittal, for instance, is a language of execution. It creates a divide between *planning* the strategy and *doing* the strategy, and keeps these as oppositional, producing a sense of separation between the work of management and the work of staff. As an institution, we ***behave*** as if deciding what to do (strategy) is the work of management, and doing it (implementation) is the work of Schools, Faculties and Divisions. We have fallen into the execution trap – where staff feel that they are accountable for *implementing* management's *strategy* rather than continuously improving what we do as we work with the strategy. And *busyness*

rather than good 'business' is the result. It is also likely that calls for better communication and consultation at CSU (and in other organisations) is in fact a proxy complaint pointing more at the lack of agency staff members feel within a framework of strategy-vs-implementation.

Our series of Hot Topic discussion papers at Academic Senate, Faculty Boards, and some School Boards over the past year and a half have all focussed on the issue of Academic Quality – trying to define it, and make sure we know what it is. We have agreed, in line with Finnie and Usher's international review (2005), that academic quality is a *process* of continuous interrogation of academic work rather than a quantitative measurement. What we want to stress is that quality is produced in the very specific conditions of our governance committees, where differences in rank and status are levelled by legislation. Thinking of quality as some set of measures or key performance indicators misses this fundamental *organisational* aspect of academic quality that aspires to excellence. Quality is not a measure but rather a process of continuous open questioning and problem-solving, which may *use* measures to guide its thinking, but which cannot be reduced to them.

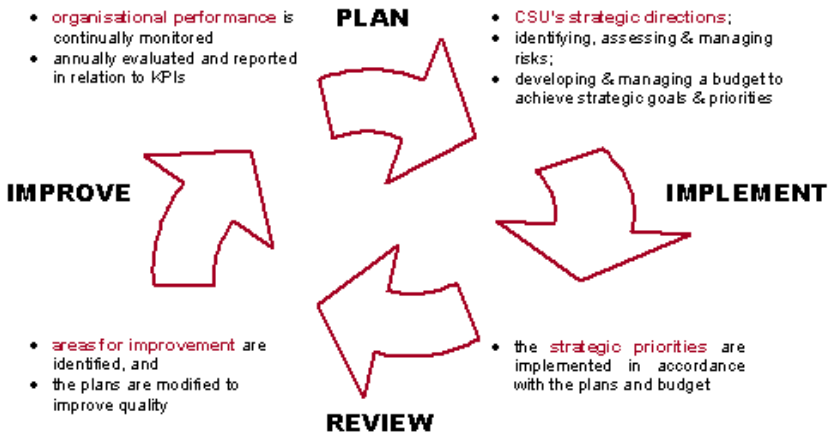
If there is something happening in a School or in a Course that is standing in the way of the University achieving compliance with the HESF, for instance, members of the School or Course governance committees *are obliged to* raise this for attention, and the conversation around that *must* be a conversation that involves everyone at every level across academic, administrative, support staff, and management. And this conversation must include the possibility that the higher-level strategy may need to be reconsidered, and tweaked. This is what our governance committees are for - ensuring we have the right policies as a Higher Education Provider (compliance) in the interests of achieving our unique strategic (quality) goals. We are keen for CSU to develop a *keystone habit* of ensuring that our policies and strategies are workable and have had detailed scrutiny by the maximum number of staff at all levels, in the formal conditions of governance meetings, where input and decisions are genuinely, legally, collective.

Rather than seeing the role of our committees as 'implementing' or 'executing' (in Martin's terms) a strategy handed down from above, this approach recognises that good strategy cannot be separated from implementation – it is *a continuous cycle* involving the entire organisation striving to improve quality.

Continuous improvement

Continuous improvement (CI) is a set of ideas and practices based in social psychology that has been taken up by businesses across the world. It has its origin in an explicit desire to minimise the gap between strategic objectives and everyday work (Finnie & Usher, 2005; Terziovski & Power, 2007). The core mechanism for CI is essentially *feedback* – using feedback in implementation of initiatives to then further refine the activity, in an ongoing way. CSU advocates the PIRI cycle version of CI, which has the same basic components as all CI – **P**lan, **I**mplement, **R**eview and **I**mprove.

The Continuous Improvement Cycle



The idea of using feedback to continually improve a process or activity is not problematic. But it can fall down when the improvement cycles are insufficiently elaborated. CI approaches usually insist on the need for CI cycles to be co-produced by all levels of an organisation, with *significant authority at each level* to alter and design processes. But without shared commitment across the organisation, it is quite common for continual improvement processes to not form actual *cycles* – and not 'close the loop'. Nearly always this is because CI is implemented without a *shared* building out of the cycles – testing ideas within the constraints of the networked organisation.

Continuous Improvement processes are commonly overlaid on a more traditional management approach. For example, *Planning* and *Reviewing* are relatively low-overhead activities, requiring little more than documentation. For that reason, Continuous Improvement processes often focus very heavily on those two segments of the CI cycle. *Implementation* and *Improvement* on the other hand are the heavy lifting, where ideas and plans have to be built out across the complexity of an organisation in its everyday operational work. It is not uncommon for organisations to 'black box' these phases of the cycle, such as by delegating them to the line management structure. The linkages across the phases of the CI cycle are in a piecemeal way that often loses the whole picture.

CI is also in many ways at odds with more traditional business methodologies, such as the use of measures such as KPIs. Indicators do as they say, they *indicate* in some way the health of a particular activity. This is necessarily at arm's length from the activity itself, and unlike a Continuous Improvement process, gives no direct feedback as to how to modify an existing process to improve it. KPIs are therefore, often, potent drivers of *busyness* because they lack meaningful granularity with the actual work being done. The consequence of this uneven focus and shift in scales across the various parts of the cycle is that the cycle can easily stop functioning, as a cycle.

Rather than providing immediate diagnostic guidance as to what needs tweaking, continuously, the cycle stalls between stages if different people are analysing what to do to make the transition to the next stage. The staff who have identified the problem have to wait to be told how to fix it in the next cycle, rather than sharing the issue and

deciding with the interconnecting network to adjust the strategy. Some parts of the organisation only ever plan – others only ever implement. *Busyness* arises because of this - when different parts of the PIRI cycle are dispersed among different areas of the organisation, a lot of the everyday work becomes trying to keep these all connected (producing more and more meetings). All major Continuous Improvement methodologies utilise these same principles: not hierarchical line of sight between levels of an organisation but instead the entire organisation problem-solving operational problems every day, so that adjustments (including adjustments to overall strategy) can be made where required in response to feedback.

The Operational Illusion, and Continuous Improvement

The greatest driver of the strategy/execution split is a set of assumptions around operational work. Strategy work is usually seen as 'macro' level, 'big picture' work, with operational work the 'micro' level implementation of the macro. Operational work is further assumed to consist of multiple discrete bits or pieces of work, which are separate and lack connection to other activities, and to the macro level. Strategic and management work is then about building connections between these supposedly discrete activities, to coordinate their alignment with macro-level strategy. Further, the 'macro-micro' split is protected by practices, such as micro-management, where staff involved at the macro level are discouraged from acting at the operational level, and operational staff are only 'consulted', or advised, about macro-level decisions.

As Martin (2015) noted, every level of an organisation needs to respond to changing circumstances in an environment of constrained resources and options; *every level needs to operate strategically, all the time*. CI was developed to provide a mechanism for entire organisations to work on the same problems, without splitting the work into strategic and operational components, allocated across different levels of seniority. Project-type work does the same, where the focus is on specific problems to be solved, problems which, when unpacked, have powerful links into other problems. Rather than looking at problems through the lens of organisational structure, the structure gathers around a problem to be solved, collectively. This is also how governance mechanisms are set up, both in government and within organisations; they provide the venue for collective scrutiny and problem-solving, working alongside executive action. This not only helps to solve problems but also to provide agency to the people concerned, so that they truly own the problems at the same time.

Line management structures are heuristic devices and not operational connections, just as a map of the oceans of the world is useful for teaching geography, but misses that there is only one ocean basin on the planet, and all of the waters are already mixed. Organising by org structure produces silos, and problems are seen through the lens of each box on the org chart. Busyness is the attempt to bridge these boxed areas. But every organisational issue or problem contains within itself links to all of the other areas of operational work, and it this problem-focused approach, through governance committees, or project work (for example) that creates the needed connections, and genuine agency and ownership.

This can be difficult to grasp at first, as the Lego brick model of organisations as aggregated individual bits is widespread. But organisations are organic. The real function of most plans is to coordinate work by the line management structure, rather

than to coordinate work on the ground. Not only is strategy separated from implementation but implementation is artificially 'siloed' into boxes on an org chart. And people then experience (and are frustrated by) silos, which restrict their capacity to contribute a whole-of-institution view to problems.

Examples: Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York, Alcoa, General Electric

Denison and Nieminen (2014) describe three major corporations or authorities who have adopted a keystone habit approach to transformational change: the Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York City (with over 1.6 billion passenger movements a year), Alcoa, and General Electric. In each case, the organisation identified keystone habits as processes that had both *impact* and *interconnectedness*, keeping the scope of intervention small by targeting the right habits and then scaling through the repetition of these habits.

In psychology, habits are sometimes said to exist in a 'habit web', meaning a person has all of their habits at once – they are all related, in a connected web. Some of the most effective and counter-intuitive therapy for people with chronic problems involves them changing small habits in areas that seem completely unrelated to their main issue. For example, patients with depression are asked to change the route they drive to work each morning, or which shoe they put on first each day, or where they sit in meetings. These small habit changes, which on the surface appear to have no relationship with their chronic issue at all, end up having profound effects, often dissolving the chronic issue entirely.

This is the same insight that the keystone habit approach brings to the understanding of organisations. Organisational habits - processes and ways of doing things, and 'culture' – are all connected, and each is an indistinguishable amalgam of 'strategy' and 'operations'. Trying to separate that amalgam or habit web into strategic and operational layers, micro and macro scales and org chart boxes is what creates busyness. An implementation approach assumes separation and looks to build connection; a 'keystone habit' approach assumes connection and returns a whole-of-institution focus to all activities. As one of the central tenets of 'The Toyota Way' (Toyota was one of the pioneers in continuous improvement) says: *Continuously solving root problems drives organizational learning.*

This is the *Kaizen* process used in Japanese industry, and it involves all staff developing and operating the cycles (Finnie & Usher, 2005). Each member of staff has significant authority, including the ability to halt an entire production line, if quality gaps are found, and this in turn triggers a re-assessment of the entire strategy, across every level. This is not about dissolving hierarchy but about seeing organisational problems as whole-of-organisation problems to be continuously solved, by the whole organisation. It does not divide the work of the organisation into strategy and implementation, or management and staff, where the most difficult problems become implementation problems, and the responsibility of only one section of staff to solve. As the Vice- Chancellor noted in response to a draft of this paper:

> *… the famous example of Toyota employees being able to stop the assembly line wouldn't work if they had to wait for a quarterly meeting to discuss whether or not the production line should be*

stopped. So, I guess I'm arguing for an integrated approach between management and academic governance through Senate and subcommittees.

In thinking about how such an approach can be achieved in our institution, we return to the idea of the 'keystone habit' introduced above.

A key organisational habit for shared attention at CSU?

One of the key habits of our institutional network at CSU is our committee structure. If we are to reduce the culture of *busyness* in our institution, we have to ask the question: do we care enough to try to change our habits? Are we prepared (as a whole institution) to change to the way we work in the interests of aiming to continuously achieve excellence at CSU? Academic Senate would like to initiate this sort of change.

As we noted above, Senate is a comprehensive cross-section of the academic and management structure of the University. Its legislated role, through the extensive network of Senate committees, is to be *the venue where the collective academic view on any matter with academic implications is debated and decided*. We are arguing here, however, our belief that the execution trap has led to the breaking down of this basic governance mechanism, so that decisions are seen to be made and implemented only under the direction of our line management structure, without prior debate and problem-solving by the collective academy. The governance component has been replaced by consultation mechanisms, without the specific power of formal governance arrangements to protect and nourish agency within the organisation. We see the absence of this sort of debate and problem-solving *with* members of management teams in the formal and protected venue of Senate committees as a central reason for staff to report the feeling of *busyness* – where they are being asked to implement decisions made elsewhere.

Governance committees are designed to 'bring people along' with decisions, by ensuring their genuine agency in the debating and making of those decisions. They do not work in opposition to management. As we are stressing here, this would be a tautology, as most senior management are also Senate members. CSU's By Law (NSW Govt, 2005) requires Academic Senate to advise management and Council on *all* academic matters, to provide the collective academic view. Committee decisions about innovations aimed at improving quality should be recorded and implemented *at that committee level*, and the responsible manager as a member of that committee, should then have conversations with associated interconnected areas to allow immediate adjustments across the system for the testing to occur. Depending on the outcome, the committee is thereby empowered to creating strategy through continuous improvement rather than simply 'implementing' strategy without the capacity to solve problems and address limitations.

Our proposal is that, from 2017, as we move forward into a new whole of CSU strategy, we should study what happens if we use the HESF to galvanise this collective process. Can we establish the habit of making these governance committees the venue where our compliance with (and enhancement of) the Higher Education Standards is unpacked and debated, so that academic decisions can be made on the foundation of the advice coming from this collective debate and problem-solving?

This would require us to stop bypassing this process by using 'consultation' mechanisms, which, as we have argued above, have the strategy-implementation split already built into them. But for this to occur, all members of the institution must become part of the action – collaborative researchers who agree to suspend disbelief or pre-judgement, and see what happens.

Because the new CSU Strategy 2017-2022 is aiming to set our institution apart and bring us renown for our quality and excellence among our peers, we believe that we have the opportunity at this point to see what might happen if we introduce this as a core practice. If it works, or however it works differently – we may have introduced a *keystone habit* of continuous improvement and inquiry (where we implement, review and improve our university strategy together), as networked nodes of a single institution, thereby avoiding the split between strategy and implementation, and keeping ourselves out of the *busyness* of the execution trap.

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