

Moving Beyond Busyness: Solutions Paper.
Paper for SEC, Academic Senate, Faculty Boards and School Boards,
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Nick Drengenberg
Jo-Anne Reid

Executive Summary

The Busyness ‘Issues Paper’ that has informed Discussion of Academic Quality at Charles Sturt University suggests that busyness has little to do with time management, but instead is the result of a lack of proper integration between the management and governance of work. When policies and decisions of the University are not properly tested in governance forums, it allows for the release of an unmanageable number of initiatives, and a lack of consideration of the connections between them, which if carried out may reduce their number substantially. Governance is what gives people meaningful input (agency) into the direction and carrying out of work, through collective oversight and the power-levelling characteristics (one voice, one vote) of formal committees, running alongside management and including managers in this collective discussion.

This solutions paper suggests a way forward to counteract busyness at CSU, by refocusing the existing Academic Senate governance committees, such as School Boards and Faculty Boards, on an integrated and continuous process of providing collective oversight to the management of academic work. The two must operate in an interconnected way, to allow ideas to be properly tested across the widest range of people.

The paper also suggests using the new *Higher Education Standards Framework* as the definition of quality that will form a ‘keystone habit’, and provide a point of single focus that will link many disparate pieces of work that are currently undertaken separately.

By focusing on the Standards in the governance of its work, CSU will be able to meet its compliance requirements under the Standards, while at the same time having a connecting framework to improve overall quality of work, in a way that gives everybody a powerful voice in the conversation. Using our governance committees in this way will act against busyness by properly testing what CSU does in academic work, and identifying connections between what on the surface may look like separate tasks.

Moving Beyond Busyness: Solutions Paper.

Introduction

The paper 'Moving beyond Busyness: Issues Paper' (Drengenberg & Reid, 2017) was prepared as a response to a discussion of *busyness* at CSU at the November 2016 meeting of Academic Senate. Reflecting on this discussion, and the points recorded in the Minutes of the meeting, we are faced with the obligation of highlighting an important issue for the university at this point in time. While the effects of busyness are often talked about as issues of 'workload', busyness itself has more to do with how we are working as an institution. To take us forward, and to help address this issue, we were tasked with preparing this paper for broad discussion and response across the university. 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, communicates '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.

In response to this we suggest that the intensification of work and the lack of autonomy that is registered as *busyness* seems to be highlighting a *compliance culture* over an active and engaged *quality culture* at CSU. As the Senate meeting noted, it is more productive to understand these as complementary and interdependent. The accompanying paper, 'Moving Beyond Busyness' reviews a literature of Continuous Improvement and institutional reform in large corporate setting to seek a way forward. On this basis we propose a way forward for the management and governance structures of CSU work together to bring compliance and quality work into alignment.

Summary Overview

Our aim is to increase the role of staff in monitoring and driving quality in close cooperation with management structures in Faculties and Schools.

Our goal is to embed a *Continuous Improvement* [CI] approach where there is proper integration of management and governance work, via the use of Senate committees such as School and Faculty Boards for the purpose they were intended – as a testing ground for ideas and proposals where staff of any level of hierarchy may debate and decide the outcomes.

Our proposal is to use the potential of the new TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework [HESF] as the bottom line against which Faculty and School governance committees can both a) assure *compliance*, and work with School/Faculty management to b) continuously improve *quality*. We argue that this will affect and alter one 'keystone habit' in our governance practice which will have profound connection to the rest of the organisation, producing "a profound set of cascading effects" (Denison & Nieminen, 2014, p. 26) across the institution, to mitigate the 'boil the ocean' approach that characterises busyness, when every part of organisational life is seen as a discrete and separate piece of the whole.

We propose this because, as every CSU academic staff member is a member of at least one of these governance committees through their School Board, and right up to Academic Senate itself, nearly all the senior management and critical middle management of the University are also members of them. This has been a deliberate arrangement at CSU, to ensure that the people who make decisions at all levels of governance are the same people who are then also responsible for implementing them – and that decisions are therefore workable. This proposal may result in necessary changes to the current hierarchical structures reported in some governance committees (through our 2014/5 Senate and sub-committee self-assessment), but we believe that it will help

staff to exert agency in meaningful work towards improving student learning, teaching and research. We hope that it will also achieve the larger strategic aim of developing an integrated approach between management and academic governance through Senate and subcommittees.

As we outline below, we suggest that we can achieve this by working with our rules of committee discussion and debate, and framing our attention on the HESF as the touchstone for decision-making about all academic issues. This will allow us to

- a) identify and record areas of concern (re compliance), or opportunity (re quality); and
- b) discuss, agree on, and record shared, *problem-based short-term/interim trials of actions* that the committee agrees should improve practices at the local level, with management communicating any decision to test an innovation or diversion from existing practice both horizontally and vertically across the management, systems support and governance network as necessary.
- c) The results of any improvement trial and its outcomes in relation to improved quality re the HESF is then communicated upwards through Faculty and Senate management and governance committees, who review the evidence provided and recommend changes to policy where innovation or improvements have proved beneficial.
- d) Regular Faculty reports to Academic Senate then become official records of our work to ensure both compliance with the HESF and our practices of CI for enhancing quality.

Background

Academic Senate agreed that we are interested in working with our School and Faculty Boards to address the issue of *busyness* at its root cause. In this paper, we suggest how we might use the HESF as a governing frame that allows all of our governance and management committees to be absolutely clear about our *compliance* needs (the policies and procedures we HAVE to have in place) in Higher Education while responding to (and advising us on) the *quality* agenda. This would involve a focus on identifying:

- 1) where we're NOT doing a great job, and need to improve to meet the standard, or when it is not clear how to meet the standard;
- 2) where we think we could do far better than just what's required, and offer something original or different from other institutions.

The accompanying paper provides an account of how our governance committees might assist CSU to change the way we work together – leaving behind a culture of disengaged and unfulfilling *busyness*, and moving towards a collective attention to quality. We see this as a process of identifying and changing one 'keystone habit' in our institutional practice, that we believe will have "a profound set of cascading effects" (Denison & Nieminen, 2014, p. 26) across the institution. As Denison & Nieminen (2014, p. 27) note:

Keystone habits are linked to the organizations' effectiveness (impact), and keystone habits are tightly interwoven with other habits, routines and processes in the organization (interconnectedness). This means that intervening on keystone habits is likely to have a cascading effect so that change started in one place leads to many other changes in many other places.

Based on what we see as compelling research evidence from large corporate entities, we are proposing collective action that offers the potential for productive improvement in our institution, in terms of both impact and interconnectedness, decreasing the sense of busyness.

Conclusion: a proposal to take us forward

After many months of debating 'Higher Education Quality' as a Hot Topic, the impetus for this paper came from the resolution at the September 2016 meeting of Academic Senate, which agreed to take up the challenge posed by the Vice Chancellor to:

- (a) develop and agree on an approach to assuring academic quality
- (b) assure itself that its practices do meet the relevant TEQSA standards

- (c) assure itself that we are considering and learning lessons from external benchmarking (d) assure itself that we have an approach to continuous improvement based on reflection.

Accordingly, and in the spirit of Continuous Improvement outlined above, we propose that

1. Academic Senate Committees prepare their annual work plan around attention to those elements of the HESF that our risk assessment suggests need most attention. This will mean introducing a keystone habit for Senate practice to ask for all papers and reports from Operational committees, Faculty Boards, Courses Committees, CLTC, Research Committee and other Senate Committees to include a summary with reference to the HESF.
2. The HESF and the CSU Risk Register will be placed on the Academic Senate Home page for easy reference for all staff members, who, as members of these committees, will be charged with raising and identifying issues related either to compliance or to continuous improvement of our practice in each of these areas.
3. Senate will submit to the Review of Committees being undertaken by the DVCA that School Boards be regularly scheduled into the governance structure (as below) with a standing item related to quality assurance, the HESF and actions for CI at the School level.
4. Faculty Boards TOR will also include these items as a standing part of the agenda, and Faculty reports to Academic Senate will be framed in terms of the targeted compliance and Quality issues they have scheduled for each meeting.
5. The work plan will centre on Senate meetings as follows:

Mar 2017 –Academic Senate discusses this proposal.

Proposal sent as planned (or as amended) to each School and Faculty Board, and Committee, with request for feedback to be returned for sharing across the whole institution at May Academic Senate. In line with an emergent CI approach, development over 2017 would follow:

2017	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Academic Senate		Mar 8		May 10		Jul 12		Sep 13		Nov 22	
School Boards	Feb 13/17			May		Jul		Sep			
Faculty Boards		Mar 21/22			Jun 5/6		Aug 8/9		Oct 17/18		

6. Bi-annual Faculty Courses Committees, Faculty Boards & Academic Senate Self-Assessment Survey – with feedback & recommendations and advice on the introduction of this approach being sought by August, with a report to the September meeting of Academic Senate.

In offering this paper to our academic community, we hope that a shared commitment and response against busyness may lead us together, towards the continuous enactment of CSU as a university well ‘worth working in’.

References

- Denison, D., & Nieminen, L. (2014). Habits as Change Levers, *People and Strategy*, 37, 1, 23-27.
 Government of NSW (1989). Charles Sturt University Act 1989 No 76 - NSW Legislation
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