


GATE-Germany (Hrsg.)



IMPLEMENTING AND COMMUNICATING MAJOR CHANGES TO INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

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by:

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Around the world, universities and colleges of all sorts are facing similar challenges (and opportunities) when it comes to the dramatic increase in international student mobility. GATE-Germany has commissioned eight case studies in 2011 to provide a snapshot of how certain institutions are approaching various aspects of international marketing and recruitment from using data to improve their website to creating a dedicated office for funded students from abroad. Each of the case studies reflects a particular national and international context, as well a particular moment in time; what each of these institutions will be undertaking in 10 years could very well depend on how mobility flows change – or their senior administrators! The intent of these studies was not to provide a step-by-step guide on how to do what they have each done, but to help the reader get a sense of what their colleagues are doing globally, as well as to inspire new ideas for ways to improve activities at home. We are extremely grateful for all of the interviewees who shared honestly and openly for this project, and wish everyone happy reading!

The University of Melbourne effectively transformed all of its undergraduate degree programs within a short timeframe with the implementation of the “Melbourne Model”. This opened up new challenges and opportunities for communications and recruitment both internationally and domestically.

INTRODUCTION

To further establish itself as a global university, the University of Melbourne embarked on a radical curriculum change in 2007 in order to align the institution better with both European and North American norms, as well as to attract top domestic and international students.

This case study explains how the University of Melbourne acted as a pioneer in Australian higher education to completely **redesign its degree structure** to create what was dubbed the **Melbourne Model** and how this process impacted the ways they recruit international students. This initiative serves as an example of how an established institution can create an extensive and innovative new program and continue to attract high quality students in a short amount of time, particularly if it has invested in the internal change management processes and personal relationships with international partners.

By aligning its long-term vision with persistent trends in international education, the University of Melbourne has managed to create degree structures which are more in line with international standards. Furthermore, by successfully implementing such a far ranging reform in a relatively short period, the University had to overcome many challenges and has established a set of learnings and best practices that could be applicable to universities all over the world.

	University of Melbourne
Type of Institution:	Research University
Location:	Australia
Number of Students:	44,000
Percentage of International Students:	27%.
Web Address:	www.unimelb.edu.au

BACKGROUND

In Australia, strict university entry requirements in medicine, engineering, law, and other professional disciplines, force high school students to base their subject selection on what they plan to study at university, essentially making them choose their future careers at the age of 16.

The University of Melbourne wanted to be able to give students the opportunity to choose their path later in life, allowing the selection of their degree to become a more considered choice. Upon the appointment of a new Vice Chancellor who really helped to drive this process, the University ran a series of internal and external consultations which eventually led to the launch of the *Melbourne Model*. In the context of rapidly globalizing education,

the goal of this initiative was to better align the University's curriculum with the reforms being implemented by the Bologna Process in Europe as well as the US model.

Undergraduate students would, in effect, be given the opportunity to undertake a broad range of subjects at the University without being locked into a specific field right away. Seven undergraduate degree programs have now been established that would all fit into the three-year model followed by most countries in the European Higher Education Area. They include Bachelor of Arts, Biomedicine, Commerce, Environments, Fine Arts, Music, and Science – and students earning one of these new degrees will take subjects in the various disciplines in the broader subject area. All of the professional programs including architecture, engineering, teaching, medicine, law, etc. were placed at the graduate level, allowing students to do a three year undergraduate degree and then move on to a professional or other masters program delivered in graduate schools.

With the establishment of a comprehensive suite of graduate schools, the University's long-term goal is to increase the proportion of its graduate students to about 50% of the total student body. As more governments around the world are placing an emphasis on graduate education this will position the University of Melbourne well for the future.

As any universities who have gone through the Bologna Process are well aware, reviewing and changing the curriculum and degree structures of every program simultaneously within an institution is a transformative process that universities rarely, if ever, undertake. The fact that Melbourne did this within a short timeframe required a particularly high degree of careful change management processes, as well as internal and external communications.

IMPLEMENTATION

The decision to make changes to the curriculum was taken in 2006, as well as the decision to take one year to complete the roll out of the first year of study and take the new programs to market. A provost was appointed to lead the development of the academic content, while individual deans worked through their own discipline areas and the Senior Vice-Principal took care of the underlying administration of the process.

The first intake in 2008 did not leave much time to implement the changes across the organization. As a result, adjustments to the degree programs and curricula had to be made after the launch. In the end, 93 undergraduate degree offerings were reduced to 6, and a dimension of "breadth" was added to the curriculum which required first year students to take 25% of their subjects outside of their discipline. This amount has subsequently been revised in some programs in order to accommodate other requirements. The flexibility to make adjustments to the programs along the way has been an important part of the success of the implementation of this dramatic change.

The change to the new model also required some restructuring to the administrative aspects of the organization itself, including the student service delivery and marketing and communications. The implementation of this is still rippling through the University. It also had a positive and negative impact on market share in some areas as the market adjusted to the new offerings. While it can be tough for staff morale to see so many changes, the University has been able to reach a point where things have started to stabilize. It has also been important to see the positive impact of the change starting to be more evident – the programs are all bedded-down now, the quality of incoming students is high, and there is increasingly positive feedback about the programs and ancillary services.

Marketing the new programs set up its own unique set of often unexpected challenges, particularly in the domestic market which was very familiar with the former degree and program structure. Since the changes were made to conform more easily with international norms – and international students are far more likely to be familiar with a wide range of university systems – there seemed to be less of a need to explain how these degrees differed from the past, and simply a need to communicate their benefits to prospective international students.

The greatest demand for information revolved around a greater explanation of what would now be included in the curriculum, and if the new degrees would be accredited or recognized. As a way of overcoming this challenge, the University started reaching out to not just students but also to parents. In-country events which engage with parents and alumni have been an effective way of disseminating information and eliminating misconceptions about the changes for both students and their families.

Explaining details about individual courses ended up taking a lot of the communication team's time, sometimes not allowing for other features or services of the university to be addressed. However, now that the *Melbourne Model* has been firmly established, the University will have more capacity to promote other services, especially when it relates to helping students with career outcomes. To set up the sustainable long term success of the *Melbourne Model* among students, particularly international students who invest more (due to the higher tuition fees for international students), it is particularly important to be able to explain how the University supports students through the job-search process and engagement with employers.

The recruitment systems employed by the University have also evolved over time. Graduate recruitment had initially been done in individual faculties and departments. At the initial roll-out of the *Melbourne Model*, a centralized graduate student recruitment team was created to promote the new degrees and pathway opportunities. Graduate recruitment has largely moved back to the individual graduate schools, leaving the central team responsible for undergraduate recruitment and the University as a whole and with facilitating coordination amongst the various graduate school recruitment teams. The shift to the *Melbourne Model* will likely also shift larger numbers of the international student population to graduate degrees, in part because there are more domestic opportunities for undergraduate education in key Asian target markets than previously and because the masters and other graduate degrees are so attractive to this market.

In the international arena, the central recruitment team has worked with the individual faculties and graduate schools to identify markets that have a high potential for student recruitment and offering them support and information. This allows for a more centrally coordinated strategy as to which countries will be targeted for recruitment activities. A benefit of this arrangement is that it allows faculties and graduate schools to have individual freedom and responsibility but still allows for coordination and streamlining, which helps to save resources and time for the University as a whole.

The national and international recruitment teams, responsible for all content of prospective student websites and publications, fall under the Office of Admissions, while the marketing and communications department is responsible for advertising, media etc. at a corporate level. Both the areas sit within the same division, that of Global Engagement. .

As touched on earlier, there was a notable impact on certain markets based on the curriculum changes – particularly due to the cost factor and the length of the degrees. Programs such as medicine and engineering went from six to seven years and four to five years, respectively, which led to a drop in applicants from markets such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia, which had consistently sent students for these disciplines. The University's scholarship program did little to assuage this impact. At the same time, the change led to new opportunities for international students in other markets who were interested in starting the professional degree post their bachelors– Canadian students, for example, are very happy to see the opportunity to get a graduate degree in medicine or dentistry and Canada and the US are now in the University's top 10 markets. It should be noted that Sri Lanka and Mauritius have seen a swing-back in enrolments recently as better understanding and appreciation of the value of the programs has developed.

The fact that their international recruitment is focused on partnerships and networks allowed the University of Melbourne to explain the changes to its degree programs directly – and get key influencers abroad up to date on the new opportunities for students. Working with foreign high schools and higher education institutions has been an effective and targeted way of spreading information about the University. One common practice is to run standalone events, called “open houses,” which are essentially targeted mini-exhibitions about the University that allow people to come and speak with University representatives and academic staff.

There is also a strong commitment to accepting students for study abroad opportunities at the University since that can be an important tool to recruit students into graduate study. They also work a lot with parents internationally, hosting events specifically for them.

There has been a longstanding belief at the University that proper relationship building and management require face to face contact and a committed presence in the market, as well as understanding of the cultural dimension. This requires a significant investment of time and resources for staff to put in the necessary travel, and may not always produce immediate results. Nevertheless, the effort towards building trusting relationships has been critical for success in many cultures, such as those in Latin America and Asia. Due to an increasingly competitive landscape, it is doubly important for any university to think carefully about and invest in strategic relationships over the long term. This can be a point of tension when there are limited resources, so it is important to not lose sight of the long-term when setting priorities.

SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

- Implementing major changes in a university requires careful change management processes and communications to internal and external audiences.
- In order to be successful, large changes in universities should be aligned with a long term vision.
- Many of the processes in implementing major changes can be counter-intuitive and will likely require learning by trial and error and making adjustments along the way before the optimal solution is discovered.
- It can be difficult to inform prospective students about a large change in a short amount of time, so supplementing student communications in creative ways, such as

by engaging with parents or alumni or promoting how the degree can lead to a job, can help spread the word faster and in a more effective way.

- Allowing for some de-centralized decision making for recruitment in different disciplines while maintaining a centrally coordinated strategy can both help individual faculties to make the best decisions while optimizing resource usage for the university as a whole.
- Partnering with international educational institutions, such as high schools, colleges and universities, can often be more effective in the long term than advertising in terms of promotion.
- Successful partnerships with international institutions require a significant investment of time and resources as well as travel in order to build trusting relationships and establish a presence in the market.

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