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New Centre, New Course Structures, New Opportunities

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Abstract:

This paper is the second part of a trilogy. The first part related to the concepts underlying the new centre with the emphasis shifting away from a teaching, and towards a learning, paradigm. This part aims to emphasise the importance of the logistics of course structure, and to show that differential advantage can be gained through the creation of innovative structures. The final part will concentrate on new ways of distributing learning, combining best practice established in the past to the new opportunities that developments in information and communications technology, provide. The papers are widely circulated amongst students and staff, with the joint purpose of communicating the vision and stimulating debate, both formally and informally. The intention is that through this process, all can be involved in further refining, influencing and developing the vision, which by its very nature, needs to be dynamic.

Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre (SULC) is the result of a unique partnership between Staffordshire University and Tamworth and Lichfield College, supported by the European Union. Converting the vision of a joint centre, combining further and higher education, to the reality took less than a year. The conception of SULC is a direct and proactive response to the changing environment that UK further and higher education institutions now operate in, and to the needs of the local economy. SULC will be much more than just another educational premise. It aims to create a dynamic, new, learning culture with innovation and creativeness at its core, and to act as a catalyst in the re-engineering of learning processes, making use of the electronic gateways that modern technology and communications infrastructure provide. The intention is to give genuine lifelong learning opportunities to the people and businesses of the region, specialising in Business, Computing and IT and Health and Social Care, at all academic levels, where continuous study becomes the norm. Hopefully, a model of good practice will emerge that can be used to reshape learning processes both intra and inter organisations.

New Centre, New Course Structures, New Opportunities

This paper aims to outline some of the thinking that has gone into the development of the BA (Hons) Business Studies course that will be delivered in the new centre in September (1998). It takes a very practical, hands-on approach which outlines what we are actually doing, and the thinking that has underpinned this. From the outset, it is important to understand that as providers, we recognise that we are on a steep learning curve, and that calculated risks are being taken with some of the changes that we are being made. Change, risk and consequential uncertainty are perhaps necessary companions. The stakes are now high, perhaps more so than ever before. Major miscalculations could result in financial disaster. No longer do safety nets magically appear to bail out those who err. Equally, the potential benefits are great, and it could well be argued that to stand still is relatively to go backwards. It is our intention to lead change in the field of undergraduate business education and to develop new structures and processes that will enable us to continue to thrive in the future.

Overview of the Operating Environment:

It is important to understand some of the structural changes that have taken place in UK Higher Education over the past seven years. During this time, participation rates in undergraduate programmes have increased from less than 10% of the population to over 30%. [1] Growth has occurred in full and part time provision. Funding formulae now relates to recruitment levels. Additional further growth was capped in 1996, as the cost to the Exchequer escalated. Under-recruitment is penalised. The overall unit of resource per student has fallen, halving in real

terms over the past five years. In many subject areas, including business education, the recruitment of students is very competitive. Almost all universities have large business schools and so do many other providers, including further education. Other suppliers include private companies, training agencies and other support groups that have appeared in recent years. In short, for many higher education courses in the UK, there now exists a buyers market where supply outstretches demand. This is particularly true in business education, once the exclusive demesne of the old polytechnics, but now an integral part of all universities mainstream portfolios. It is essential to recognise this, as much of the content of this paper is about the creation of differential advantage to facilitate the successful recruitment of good quality undergraduates, against this background. The market has also become much more sophisticated. Potential users are discerning, and well produced glossy brochures, a brilliant advertising campaign or even a perceived high quality 'red brick' university name, will probably not, in themselves, be enough to entice would-be applicants.

From September, a further change will take place. Full time students will have to make a contribution towards the cost of tuition, initially set at £1000 per annum. Perhaps more significant, student maintenance grants will diminish to the point in two years time when they will no longer exist. Thus, a real 'double whammy' is being inflicted on those wishing to study at a higher level, post age eighteen. Conservative estimates suggest that students will run up debts of close to £20000 over the duration of a traditional three year programme. [2] Nominally, loans are being introduced to finance students, repayable over their working lives. However, at present, the maximum loan (£2600 pa in 1998-99) covers less than half of the anticipated cost of a years study. [3] Little has been said about where the remainder

comes from. Furthermore, research shows that many potential students, especially from the lower social groupings, are debt averse, particularly if it relates to education and training costs. Culturally, it is not something that has had time to germinate in the mind sets of many potential students and their families. Yet at the same time, many have had their educational expectations and aspirations raised. In the modern high tech, global economy, the importance of getting a good education and acquiring sophisticated skills is widely recognised in relation to getting stimulating and well remunerated employment with future prospects and security. Equally, from a macro economic perspective, it is essential that a large part of the work force is educated and trained in order that we can effectively compete in world markets.

In addition to these factors, others are worthy of comment. Over the past decade, business education has proliferated. The Business School at Staffordshire University now has over 5000 students studying on more than fifty awards. This is almost a third of the whole university population. This is double the number of five years ago. Yet the number of full time academic staff has increased only marginally. Staff - Student ratios have increased from 1 to 16 to 1 to 35. Consequently, individual students get less time from staff. They are often taught in large groups. The number of contact hours per week has fallen. The onset of semesterisation and modularity have asserted further structural pressures. Assessment has often been reduced or streamlined, partly to reduce assignment overload, but partly because of the practicalities of processing hundreds of scripts or projects. As knowledge proliferates, so too do expectations on students. They have to learn more. Their personal expectations have also risen, as they perceive that they need good results to 'get on' in the job market. Even before the introduction of tuition fees, many have

to work a significant number of hours in part time employment. The average in Staffordshire University is 15 hours per week. [4] There are clear benefits in doing this, not only financial but experiential. However, there is a clear cost on individual students in terms of time and energy, and if the right balance of work and study is not achieved, the effects on academic performance can be devastating. In the year 1997-98, 20% of those enrolling on degree courses did not complete in the expected time. [5] It is widely believed amongst experienced academic staff that the biggest single cause of non completion relates to financial pressures on individuals and their need to split their loyalty between work and study.

This may all sound very gloomy, and in a way, it is. Perhaps the only certainty, and indeed constant, in the environment that we now operate, is that of change. This is often outside of our direct control. However, a dynamic situation provides opportunities and challenges for the innovative and entrepreneurial. This venture is very much a proactive response to the issues that are not going to disappear. It is very important, indeed essential, to fully comprehend the changes that are, and will continue to take place, in order to appreciate some of the solutions that are being developed in this paper.

Background to the new University Centre:

Building started on the Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre (SULC) in February 1997 and was completed in December of the same year. The Centre is jointly owned by Staffordshire University and Tamworth and Lichfield College,

thereby formally bringing together further and higher education under one roof. The capital cost of the centre was £3.2m, with 40% of the total coming from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The basis of the European contribution is dependent on the centre supporting small and medium sized enterprises (SME's, <250 employees) in the area. Within a 10 mile radius, there are over 8000 SME's, most of which employ less than 10 people. Economic performance indicators for this region are below the European average, which again was an important factor in gaining EU financial support. [6] The majority of provision within the centre will be based around Computing and Information Technology and Business and Management. Perhaps our main reason for being is to play a proactive part in the development of a dynamic local economy, helping to bring long lasting future prosperity, based on a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation.

The building is modern, comprising 9 teaching / learning / tutorial rooms, 4 electronic classrooms and an open access computer room. All 120 computers are multimedia (200 MHz, 2.5gb HDD, 32 mb RAM). Computers run in NT4, with MS Office 97 on all. Much other software is available. All are linked to the servers on the main university campus via a 620 mbps (theoretical) fibre optic cable. This infers that network access is fast and that video conferencing will run efficiently and effectively. Two rooms have been equipped for video conferencing. Additionally, there are 4 portable computer projectors with laptops attached to facilitate PowerPoint displays etc. All rooms have electric points and 8 network connection points. Laptops can be connected to these. The adjacent city library will maintain and control our book stocks, and a full intra (and inter) library loan service will be available. This will be supplemented by the development of a digital library.

Our aim is to provide genuine lifelong learning opportunities for individuals and small businesses in South Staffordshire. To create 'seamless robes' of learning activity whereby progression and continuation become the norm. It is essential that funding sources are optimally used, especially (but not exclusively) that which is available from the FEFC and HEFC. It is important to have clear and transparent progression routes from the most basic of courses through to Honours and Masters degrees and professional qualifications. Continued effort must be made to strive to raise the aspirations and expectations of our multifarious (potential) local user groups in order that they become genuine lifelong learners. There will be many factors influencing this process including marketing activity, original curriculum development, provision of high quality facilities and innovative resources, the development of a welcoming learning environment, easy and convenient access, high quality teaching / learning support and good management of facilities and resources.

To both survive and thrive, we, as learning providers, must be focused on the present (and future) needs of the market place. It is essential to be proactive in our approach and adaptable, flexible and responsive in the provision that is offered. Recognition that education now genuinely operates in a competitive global marketplace and that developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are likely to have a significant impact on the distribution of learning over the next few years. There is no reason why Harvard, for example, cannot deliver their courses into the homes of people in Staffordshire should they want to. It is essential to understand the implications of these threats, but also to see that ICT gives many

new opportunities. Differential advantage can be gained through developing innovative processes and structures that harness the potential of the new 'electronic gateways' that the information superhighways provide. The infrastructure within SULC will make it possible to capitalise on many of these new opportunities. Staffordshire Universities' 'Building Learning Communities' (BLC) [7] initiative and the adoption of Lotus Learning Space [8] provide both the underpinning philosophy, a coherent (corporate) strategy and the means to actually develop and distribute a range of learning materials, that realise the potential of the physical infrastructure.

When deciding exactly what business courses to offer in Lichfield, a number of considerations had to be made. Firstly, it was felt to be inappropriate to develop a completely new course, with all that that infers. Many undergraduate Business Awards (>40) already exist, and to add to this seemed inappropriate. Eventually the BA in Business Studies (BABS) was chosen because it remains very popular (over a thousand students are currently studying towards this), and it is not available at the Stafford campus, which is geographically quite close to Lichfield. This therefore helps to avoid direct competition with courses there, which would not be helpful to the Business School or the University.

It may be helpful at this stage to comment on the anticipated market. The targeted segments are clear and focussed. The aim is to attract what traditionally would be regarded as working, part time students who live (or work) within 7-8 miles of the campus. Many will probably be working within local SME's. Another segment will be those that traditionally would have been thought of as full time students, but who chose to live at home. There are many schools with large sixth forms within

eight miles of the Centre. Lichfield / Burntwood has five schools, Tamworth has eight, Sutton Coldfield has four as does Rugeley and Cannock. With the changes in student and higher education funding that have already been discussed, it is anticipated that a growing number of students, who might have studied away from home in the past, may now be forced to review this situation. Furthermore, some who may well not have wanted to move away from home to continue their studies (especially from social / economic backgrounds where there is no tradition of going to university), now have a real alternative. It is important to create natural progression routes that are local, coherent and continuous, and where barriers to entry, be they physical, psychological or whatever, are removed. A 'one stop shop' approach will help to achieve this.

The Product:

Level 1 of the BABS course will be common, with two electives available for choice. These will include choice of a language, tourism, marketing and accounting. It may be possible to follow a computing module as well. At Levels 2 and 3, all students will follow a common core, but they will be able to choose business options from either Tourism, Marketing or Accountancy. They will be able to specialise or mix options. This will give some subject choice and ability to specialise, and it may also enable students to follow modules that relate to existing professional qualifications. For example, if they choose marketing options, they will study Marketing Management, International Marketing and Marketing Communications at level two, and Marketing Planning and Control and Marketing Decision and Analysis at level three. They will then have covered the necessary subject areas to enable them to sit the CIM external examinations, thereby gaining an Advanced Certificate (and later,

diploma) in Marketing, as well as their Honours degree. This is adding a huge amount of value to that which is offered, at no extra cost.

In terms of full and part time differentiation in modes of study, it may well be more relevant to focus on the speed of study. Faster, or slower. This may vary between individuals at different stages of the course, to fit in with circumstances and lifestyle. It is intended to structure the timetable of the course to reflect this. Modules will not be duplicated to accommodate what were full and part time courses. Some will be offered in the daytime, others in the evenings (see Appendix, Table 2). A flip - flop system will operate whereby in one year, certain modules are put on during the daytime, and in the following year, they will be put on in the evenings. It is intended to post a provisional two year schedule so that students can plot and plan how, when and what they will study. Those studying at a faster rate will therefore have to work one or possibly two evenings per week. The 'quid pro quo' is that formal teaching will be organised over a maximum of three days, thereby giving students the time to either work or study. Allowing fast track students (formally) the time to earn money whilst they are studying is seen as vital against the background of diminishing grants, increasing student indebtedness and the attitudes of those that currently actively choose not to continue their studies from FE to HE. If organised sensibly, students can enhance their curriculum vitae and experience the work environment first hand, which may make their academic studies, especially in business, much more relevant. For those students that still want a traditional campus based course, with accommodation and a traditional student way of life, then those offered elsewhere will probably be more appropriate.

In a market driven situation, choice is important; The types of choices that are offered will influence our position in the market. To be effective, it is vital to understand the requirements of our identified market(s), and to match our resources to these. The concept of choice is an interesting one and one that needs consideration. In the context of Business School Awards, choice has often centred around product considerations. i.e. What modules to study, or indeed which Award to follow. This has led to a complex system emerging that is often logistically difficult to operate.

There are other ways of looking at choice. For our intended market segments, perhaps the most important choice factors are *when* and at *what time* courses are offered, *the speed* at which they can be pursued (with consequent implications on flexibility), the *learning support* that is available and the *type* of materials that are used. It is important to experiment in these areas, and this could provide the competitive advantage through structure and process differentiation that is sought.

The business school has a model that is not currently used in the UK, but is followed by some overseas partners in the Far East. It has proved to be both popular and successful and is one that provides an initial template from which to work. There are many similarities in their current operating environment to that which is emerging in the UK. Under this model, students can study fast or slow track on a roll on, roll off basis; Modules are studied intensively (six to seven weeks) and normally, only three are studied concurrently. There is relatively little choice in terms of what is actually studied. Student success rates under this system are good, and research shows that on balance, the intensive approach works for many and is valued by most. [9]

Operational details:

Logistical considerations of organising courses such as scheduling and timetabling are often underplayed (from the supply perspective) in comparison to subject content, mode of assessment and quality issues, in their relative importance. However, if students are asked about issues that are important to them, it is often the logistical ones that are given the highest priority.

The way that the BABS course has been structured reflects views that past students have fed back. Teaching will run in four time zones, 1030 - 1230, 1300 - 1500, 1630 - 1830, 1900 - 2100. The timetable will be scheduled over three days, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Those working as 'full time' students will have to study for one or two evenings per week. In the evening sessions, it is likely that they will join traditional 'part time' students. This could be a valuable learning experience for both. Modules will be taught over six weeks, with four hours teaching input per week. The four input hours will be scheduled consecutively. e.g. Marketing Concepts 1 might run on a Monday 1030 - 1230, 1300 - 1500 in the first year (and 1630 - 1830, 1900 - 2100 in the second year [flip flop]). It will be for individual lecturers to determine how best to use the time. A typical session might look like this:

1030 - 1115:	Formal lecture
1115 - 1200:	Individual / Group activity
1200 - 1230:	Feedback session
1230 - 1300:	Lunch
1300 - 1400:	Computer based learning activity (Kotler CD?)
1400 - 1440:	Formal lecture
1440 - 1500:	Task setting for the next week/organising learning activity
1500 -	Tutorials

A week will be left 'empty' following this period for assessment or other appropriate use of the time. Normally, students will study a maximum of three modules concurrently.

The benefits of this structure:

This will be an intensive approach to learning; At first sight, there appears to be little reflection time allowed. However, the Award has been constructed in such a way to ensure that students have to revisit a subject area at least once, to follow up that which has been completed at an earlier time. In between, other modules will be studied from different subject disciplines, giving students the opportunity to apply concepts and knowledge gained in one area to another. To cross relate ideas in business studies is very important, but equally difficult. This approach may help in this process. It should also be noted that in functional disciplines such as Business Studies, studying six very different and often disparate subjects simultaneously is not easy. Often assessments are set near the end of a module, leading to bunching and overload. The proposed structure will to an extent mitigate these problems.

This structure will necessitate a different approach to teaching and learning. In the light of BLC, it could provide a useful new structure to focus lecturers attention on exactly what they are doing, making use of ICT where possible and appropriate. One potential concern of the intensive structure that is proposed is what happens to the student who misses through illness, or whatever, a week (or more) of lecturer led learning. There can be no easy answer to this. However, with clearly defined module specifications, and clearly structured sessions, most students ought to be able to

catch up through use of electronic and paper based materials. They will have the benefit of being able to access Learning Support Co-ordinators as well as academic staff. Absence is always a problem, but our structures will ensure that the consequent problems are minimised. The worst case scenario would be that the course could be restudied the following year.

This structure will allow four starting points during the year, which allows many benefits, both to ourselves, as providers, and to potential students. The roll on, roll off approach offers the flexibility that many would-be users need, to accommodate the increasing unpredictability of their lifestyles.

Learning Support:

Students will be much more peripatetic than in the past; so too will lecturers. It is therefore important to ensure that alternative learning support mechanisms are in place. This will happen at different levels; Direct support can be provided through the telephone / fax and e-mail. Complementary help can be given by the Learning Support Co-ordinators (LSC's), who will always be available whenever the building is physically open. There will initially be a team of six people. All will be graduates, preferably teacher trained. Appointments will ensure an appropriate mix of subject background and expertise. These will provide an interface between students and lecturers. They will liaise with lecturers to ensure that they know what is going on, and when. They will be aware of the nature of assignments and the timing of these. They will be aware of module specifications, and the learning implications of these.

Over time, they should be able to take a proactive approach to learning support, and be able to provide students with a high quality and responsive system. It should be emphasised that they are not lecturers; they only provide support to these. This is a new tier of staffing necessitated by the new operating environment in which we work. It could well be that as Lotus Learning Space materials develop, LSC's will be able to help students with these, thereby providing a human interface to electronic delivery of learning. There are many useful lessons to be drawn from the Open University relating to how learners learn, and the additional support that they need to effectively learn.

The Future:

This structure will be piloted at Lichfield from this September. The plan is then to operate this framework through our regional partner colleges, thereby developing a genuine Staffordshire Business Framework. Recently a successful bid for £1.57m was made to enable broad band, fibre optic cable to be laid the length and breadth of Staffordshire, connecting all of the county's colleges of further education to the university. [10] This infrastructure puts in place the opportunity to deliver courses and materials in a radically different way in the future. The challenge is to harness the power of new technology, and to develop systems, structures and materials that facilitate continuous learning that fit in with needs and lifestyles of people in the twenty first century.

Process re-engineering is at the heart of the structural changes outlined. A brand new building gives the perfect opportunity to do things differently and to be enterprising and innovative. It is realistic and possible to establish a different type of culture to that which exists elsewhere. It is not easy to reconcile user needs with resource restraints, or to win the support of everyone from the supply perspective. No doubt that other issues will also appear. However, in this type of situation, you only get one chance to cast a new mould, and the real sin would be not to try. If nothing else, that situation has so far been avoided. Early indications suggest that the new structures are welcomed, and this is encouraging, but ultimately, only time will tell.

Appendix

Table 1 Outline of BA Business Studies Award Structure

First Year	Business Environment 1	ELECTIVE	Marketing Concepts 1
First Year	Business Environment 2	Communication and IT / QM 1	Marketing Concepts 2
First Year	Management of Operations	Communication and IT / QM 2	Human Aspects of the Workplace 1
First Year	Management of Operations	ELECTIVE	Human Aspects of the Workplace 2
Second Year	Economic Environment 1	OPTION	Financial Accounting and Decision Making 1
Second Year	Economic Environment 2	OPTION	Financial Accounting and Decision Making 2
Second Year	Organisations in Context	Legal Environment	Enterprise Skills 1
Second Year	OPTION	Company Law	Enterprise Skills 2
Third Year	Strategy 1	Advanced Business Function 1	PROJECT
Third Year	Strategy 2	Advanced Business Function 2	PROJECT
Third Year	Business Decision Making 1	OPTION	PROJECT*
Third Year	Business Decision Making 2	OPTION	PROJECT*

Table 2 First Year BA Business Studies Timetable

Level 1 TT 1998 - 1999	Semester 1A	Semester 1B	Semester 2A	Semester 2B
Tuesday 1030 - 1230	Business Environment_1	Business Environment_2	Management of Operations	Management of Operations
Tuesday 1300 - 1500	Business Environment_1	Business Environment_2	Management of Operations	Management of Operations
Tuesday 1630 - 1830				
Tuesday 1900 - 2100				
Wednesday 1030 - 1230				Elective
Wednesday 1300 - 1500				Elective
Wednesday 1630 - 1830	Elective	Communication / IT / QM_1	Communication / IT / QM_2	
Wednesday 1900 - 2100	Elective	Communication / IT / QM_1	Communication / IT / QM_2	
Thursday 1030 - 1230				
Thursday 1300 - 1500				
Thursday 1630 - 1830	Marketing Concepts_1	Marketing Concepts_2	Human Aspects in the Workplace_1	Human Aspects in the Workplace_2
Thursday 1900 - 2100	Marketing Concepts_1	Marketing Concepts_2	Human Aspects in the Workplace_1	Human Aspects in the Workplace_2

References:

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- [1]Department for Education and Employment statistics, 1990 - 1998
[2]National Union of Students estimate
[3]Financial Support for Students, DfEE, 1998/99
[4]Internal research based on a sample of SU students
[5]The Times, Aug 16th 1998, using DfEE data
[6]Birch CJ, Limby H (1996), Assessment of the market situation and potential for the proposed Lichfield University College Project
[7]Staffordshire University 1996, Building a Learning Community; strategic document outlining the universities teaching and learning policies.
[8]A software product based on Lotus Notes that will be the basis of electronic learning materials
[9]Internal research undertaken by C J Birch, based on questionnaires (n = 135) and interviews.
[10]Bid under 'Centre of Excellence' criteria, May 1998

Glossary of Abbreviations:

BABS	Bachelor of Arts (Business Studies)
BLC	Building Learning Communities
CIM	Chartered Institute of Marketing
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
HE	Higher Education
HEFC	Higher Education Funding Council
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LLS	Lotus Learning Space
LSC's	Learning Support Co-ordinators
SME's	Small to Medium sized Enterprises
SU	Staffordshire University
SUBS	Staffordshire University Business School
SULC	Staffordshire University Lichfield Centre
UK	United Kingdom