



# FROM THE INSIDE OUT: CHANGING OUR IDENTITY

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The post-compulsory education and training (PCET) sector in Australasia is in a state of flux. This fluidity is often seen as threatening, sweeping student support services aside in its wake. There is, however, another way to view the new environment. The more fluid an environment is, the more likely it is that opportunities will present themselves and that worthwhile changes can be made provided an appropriate analytical tool is used. This paper begins with a brief overview of the changes in the PCET sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand and describes some of the implications for academic support services. In the second section the paper will describe how to use Johnson and Scholes' (1997) cultural web analysis as a tool to document an organisation's culture. The final section will discuss how the team at the Learning Centre at Manukau Institute of Technology in South Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand used this tool to examine and change the centre's identity to become an academic partner rather than an institutional casualty.

**Keywords:** *Polytechnic, Learning Centre, cultural web analysis, academic partner*

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## The Tertiary Education Environment


### *Changes, challenges and competition*

There have been a number of key changes in the post compulsory education sector (PCET) in Aotearoa/New Zealand which have led to increased competition among institutions and to an increased need for institutions to demonstrate a real commitment to students. The first of these changes was the deregulation of the sector which began in the late 80s and the eventual ratification of the White Paper at the turn of the century. The second change was the introduction of bulk funding of the sector which was facilitated by the Education Amendment Bill of 1990. This particular bill also made it possible for polytechnics to offer degrees. As the sector became increasingly undifferentiated, students were offered a much greater choice of institution. The third change was the introduction of student loans. Students were required to go into debt to gain an education. Naturally, students became more discerning in their choice of institution. It is at this point that the terminology began to change and students were viewed as consumers and institutions as providers. Tertiary education entered the marketplace.

At the same time there were signals from government that increased participation in tertiary education was "... to increase as a matter of public policy" (Fitzsimons in Olssen & Matthews, 1997, p. 117) from 1993 onwards. This duly occurred in universities where participation increased "...from (less than five per cent of the population) to a mass clientele (approximately one-third of the population)" (Meade, 1997, p.7). Dr Lockwood Smith, the Minister for Education at that time, made it clear that the sector was well provided for as it received one third of the education budget. Moreover he implied that with the desired increase in numbers, funding per tertiary student would diminish "...if we are not to neglect other areas of education" (Smith, cited in Fitzsimons in Olssen & Matthews, 1997, p.107). The implication was that tertiary education providers would have to do more with less in the future.

In current practice, institutions lose funding in the same year if the number of EFTS (equivalent full time students) drops. Consequently, retention rather than recruitment

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of students has become a major organisational challenge. As one tertiary CEO put it “We used to select students, then we recruited them, now we have to retain them” (McGrath, 1998, pers. comm., September).

As the awareness of this challenge grew, institutions such as Manukau Institute of Technology invited overseas educators to come to Aotearoa/New Zealand to explain their approach to the retention of students (Spann, 1996; McInnis, 1997). Their comments informed institutional practice with a renewed focus on meeting students’ needs.

### ***Manukau Institute of Technology***


MIT is located in Manukau City (population 300,000) and is one of the fastest growing areas in new Zealand/Aotearoa. The ethnic breakdown of the region is around 20 per cent Maori, 20 per cent pacific Nations people, 10 per cent Asian and the remaining 50 per cent New Zealand Pakeha and other ethnic groups. The institute draws students from both affluent suburbs and from some of the most deprived areas in New Zealand/Aotearoa.

Many, in fact 80 per cent of our students, study part time and the institute has a student population of around 20,000. This translates into 5,000 equivalent full time students (EFTS). We have a much higher than usual cohort of mature students – only 20 per cent of our students enrol direct from school. Many are ‘second chance’ learners and others are retraining or adding to their knowledge base. A large range of qualifications is offered from certificates and diplomas through to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The diversity of our learners and their often lack of experience in a formal academic environment indicated that robust learning support was needed to prepare them to study successfully at tertiary level.

### ***The Learning Centre***

The mission statement of the Learning Centre at MIT is “To make quality learning support available to every student at Manukau Institute of Technology”. In order to achieve this, some key principles were established. These included; free provision of services to students, limited numbers of hourly tutoring sessions provided for each student. no ‘drop in’ services offered. all tutoring to take place at the centre and the

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payment of students to peer tutor. The overall goal was to foster student independence and to avoid queues of students waiting to access the service. In addition, lecturing staff were advised when their students accessed the service for content assistance. The team at the centre when I arrived in 1996 was small; only myself and my administrator were full time, and we were augmented by two 0.5 lecturers in mathematics and in communication, six casual lecturers and 17 peer tutors.

As the tertiary environment became increasingly complex, competitive and tightly funded, centres like our own became vulnerable as we did not generate EFTS funding. There was a possibility that a departmentally based learning support model may be preferred in the future. If we were to survive we needed to develop strategically.

## **Developing a strategy**

### ***The most suitable tool***

The first major decision involved selecting a tool, model or framework that looked towards the future. A traditional business model like a SWOT analysis identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats offered more of a snapshot approach firmly located in the present. This model also did not seem appropriate to our educational environment nor to provide enough focus on the future. Hamel and Prahalad (1994, p.1) certainly focussed on the future and talked about the need to “...ponder your company’s ability to shape that future and regenerate success again and again in the years and decades to come.” On closer examination their focus on core competencies and strategic architecture rather than strategic planning while useful, did not seem right for our purposes. Work by Senge (1994) on building a learning organisation provided more helpful. The centre needed to develop a flexible strategy to adapt to the rapidly changing environment. The team at the centre needed to develop a shared vision for the strategic direction of the centre. Any strategy to be considered would need to maintain the culture of the centre, yet position it at the forefront of everyone in the wider institution’s mind as critical to the success of the organisation. After further pondering we adopted Johnson and Scholes’ (1997) cultural web as our analytical tool.

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## ***The cultural web***

This model comprises a central circle, the organisational paradigm, surrounded by six further circles. These other elements are the stories, the symbols, the power structures, the organisational structures, the control systems and the rituals and routines of the organisation (Appendix 1). Careful analysis using the cultural web is a way to explore overt and underlying assumptions of an organisation's culture. Developing strategy following a cultural web analysis enables strategic alignment between all elements and produces a clear direction forward.

## **From the inside out**

### ***Our identity***

The cultural web for the Learning Centre in 1997 (Appendix 2) demonstrates the way we were then. The centre was located in a purpose built area but with problematic access. The team was very small, very dedicated and often shared roles. This led to a close, almost intuitive, way of operating. Within the microcosm of the Learning Centre, both the team and students indicated that the centre provided a valuable service to students who sought them out. Reporting to the Executive Director (Academic) firmly located us in the academic side of the house and the Advisory Committee was made up of 'champions' who were instrumental in setting up the centre in the early 90s. A peer tutor ceremony was held every year to celebrate the work of our peer tutors and to showcase the centre. There were however, four areas which needed immediate attention if we were to survive in the changing tertiary education environment.

### ***Hours***

The centre opened at 8am and few students booked the first appointment slot of the day from 8-9am. Being closed at lunchtimes created an obstacle for students who wanted to visit the centre and to arrange tutoring. As the centre closed at 5pm the last appointment was scheduled from 4-5pm and students who were employed could seldom access the centre.

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### *Working out in faculty*

The centre had developed a study skills package which required two hours to deliver and which included time management, note taking and academic writing. Previously the decision had been made to charge departments for delivery of this package, preferably during the initial weeks of the semester. Departments were averse to paying twice as they reasoned that as the centre was an operational overhead to which they were already contributing from the EFTS generated revenue. It was also difficult to maintain the momentum over the two hours of presentation without creating information overload. As for academic writing, often students had little idea of what academic writing would be required of them over the coming semester. As the semester progressed Learning Centre staff were then in constant demand to work with individual students to develop academic writing skills. While individual consultations were effective, they were not a particularly cost effective use of human resources.

### *Database*

Although there was effective processes for enrolling students with the centre and recording the outcomes of each session, there were few statistics apart from a rudimentary record of how many students came into the centre. It was difficult to talk to heads of department about how their students used the centre without developing a database which had the capacity to extract useful information. It was also difficult to put up a case for any increase in resources without robust information.

### *Staffing*

While there were benefits in having such a small team there was little flexibility. The impact on the rest of the team when anyone was away from the centre was increased workload and while there was a lot of goodwill and multi-tasking (answering the phone, enrolling a student and teaching another) it was a situation which could not continue for long. This increased workload could occur when staff were on annual or professional development leave, sick, or more frequently out in the wider academic community promoting the centre's services. While there were two staff who were New Zealand born Samoan, there was no Maori staff member.

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### ***Towards a new identity***

Using the cultural web, the team at the Learning Centre created a 'desired' web (Appendix 3). While this longer range planning was going on we were making adjustments to hours, resources and developing the database. The quest for the desirable involved a lot of discussion about what aspects of the centre were important to retain and what new things we wanted to bring in. At the same time there was an understanding that change would not happen overnight and that we needed to be realistic. Our planning often consisted of mindmapping sessions and informal discussions over coffee of the "Wouldn't it be great if...." and "I was working with a student/talking with a lecturer when I thought we could..." variety. The small team environment encouraged risk taking and innovative approaches to problems – we couldn't wait for things to happen. Another positive factor was the full support of the Executive Director (Academic) who encouraged us to reflect on what we were doing and to make strategic changes.

The key changes were to make the centre more visible, to develop our reputation as learning specialists, and to become more integrated with the wider MIT community. An organisation is much less vulnerable when it has become an integral part of the wider organisation. Most important of all was that our service to students would be more effective, timely and developmental.


### ***The paradigm***

The Learning Centre would continue to operate transparently with tutoring occurring in a large, welcoming space at the centre. Staff would be seen as non threatening learning specialists who other academic staff would consult on academic issues. They would also ask for feedback on why their students were using the centre to determine if there were any implications for their own practice. The team would maintain their commitment to a shared vision.

### ***Symbols***

The Learning Centre would ideally be located elsewhere perhaps as part of a projected 'Heart of MIT' building project. New resources would be developed and made available to students and perhaps sold to other learning support centres. Staff

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would engage in academic conversations with their fellow lecturers. Through the development of an interactive website, the centre could move into the Information Age and better serve part time students who were still unable to get to the centre because of their many commitments.

#### *Power structures*

The centre would explore forming a cluster with other academic support areas in the institute and embark on a joint branding campaign. There was to be a concerted effort to develop informal relationships with all members of the wider institute (Wheatley, 1994).

#### *Organisational structures*

Staff at the centre would continue to be employed on individual contracts where some annual leave was bought back so staff were paid more but did not have the traditional academic holidays of nine weeks. They would however have 20 days annual leave and 10 days professional development leave each year. This enabled the centre to function more flexibly by staff being available in student vacation times. This time could be spent tutoring, developing resources, research and discussion.

#### *Control systems*

The composition of the advisory committee would be changed to create more of an outward focus with more student input. The database would be set up to give information about when a student accessed centre services, what department they were enrolled with and what kind of help they wanted. The database would also record age, gender and ethnic status so that if required, statistics could be produced to demonstrate what we were doing and with whom we were doing it. The database would be another analytical tool and one which would be essential to enable the centre to demonstrate the impact of any change in service. Any partnerships with departments were to be recorded on a separate database and a report written at the end of each workshop series.



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### *Rituals and routines*

Hourly appointments for tutoring were to remain. Opening hours were to change; we needed to be open when students were able to get to the centre. The formal peer tutor award ceremony was to be replaced by a dinner for peer tutors and staff well before any study leave was scheduled. Tutors would be sent a certificate signed by the CEO. If we were to gain more staff we wanted to maintain the close supportive family atmosphere.

### *Stories*


We wanted staff and students to talk about our commitment and our expertise. Ideally, we wanted them to say that the Learning Centre was an essential part of our institution.

## **Making the changes**

In many ways the development of the database became critical to document the success of a number of key changes. After redesigning our study skills package into two one hour presentations offered four to six weeks apart and offering them free of charge to departments, our services were in demand. Students and staff saw us modelling a highly interactive delivery which resulted in greater takeup of our services by individual students. We established a Mathematics Assistance Centre in another block close by and were able to demonstrate that there was a growing need in that area. So much so that we gained additional staffing. With the team growing we were more able to teach out in faculty and to offer customised workshops. The Academic Support Group comprising the library, the centre for educational development, the language assistance centre and learning technology pooled resources to produce a series of high quality glossy brochures. The group was launched at an Executive and Managers meeting and a Head of Departments meeting on the same day.

We promoted our services constantly with a new tagline “Your partner for academic success”. This partnership was with students, staff and administrative departments. Annual reports demonstrated growth in class presentations and in individual

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assistance for tertiary level learning, academic writing, mathematics and in content areas. Increasingly, we were invited to talk about our services at departmental staff meetings and to programme leaders. All publications included material about members of the academic support group and their services. Through our contact with the Quality Adviser we were included in programme development processes and in audit processes.

Staff engaged in research, which lifted our profile institute wide. The Executive Director (Academic) brokered our services to departments as well. In one innovative partnership with departmental staff teaching a paper where students traditionally struggled, centre staff were able to model a different, more interactive delivery involving a mixture of teaching and workshops. This partnership had an impact on pass rates and enhanced the centre's reputation. Now that we were so clearly working with departments we were able to increase our staffing.

Not everything can be planned however. The projected building plan did not eventuate but the centre was relocated inside the library building when the lease for the campus bookshop expired. Students found it easier to access the Learning Centre and traffic increased further. Although we had a number of Maori peer tutors we still did not have a Maori learning specialist.

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### ***Our new identity***

The following table demonstrates how the staffing at the centre has grown which is quite a feat in a constrained fiscal environment. This growth is attributed to the ability of the centre to demonstrate, using our database, the work being undertaken with departments and with individual students.

<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>
Manager	Manager	Manager	Manager	Manager
Administrator	Administrator	Assistant to the manager	Assistant to the manager	Assistant to the manager
		0.5 lecturer (generics)	1.50 lecturers (generics)	1.50 lecturers (generics)
		1 x fulltime mathematics lecturer	1 x fulltime mathematics lecturer	2 x fulltime mathematics lecturers
				Kaiwhakahaere Tikanga Ako (Appointed 5 September, 2001)
6 casual lecturers	3 casual lecturers	3 casual lecturers	1 casual lecturer	4 casual lecturers
17 peer tutors	11 peer tutors	14 peer tutors	16 peer tutors	29 peer tutors

*Table 1: changes in staffing from 1997 to 2001*

The appointment of a Kaiwhakahaere Tikanga Ako (Maori learning specialist), in September this year, was facilitated by supplementary student funding provided by the Ministry of Education. This funding was to encourage the development of targeted initiatives to foster Maori and Pacific Nations students' success at tertiary level. The cultural web in Appendix 4 shows our current identity.

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## **Conclusion**

The key to the survival of the Learning Centre at Manukau Institute of Technology is continued integration with departments, student services and the academic support group. The growth in staffing was not something which was actively sought after but a consequence of a changed approach. Our new identity has been firmly established across the institute due to thorough analysis, planning and implementation. The Learning Centre took up the opportunities offered by the changes in the tertiary education environment to change its identity – from the inside out.

## **Moving into the future**

All academic support services need to spend time looking outside their immediate environment and at a bigger organisational picture. The big picture is critical so that there is always an overarching shared vision, which is both strategic and dynamic. It is crucial that your centre demonstrates an integrated approach where each aspect of the centre reinforces the others. Using an analytical tool such as Johnson & Scholes' (1997) cultural web can be a useful way to clarify where your centre is right now and where you might want to be in the future. How you get there will be determined by your team.

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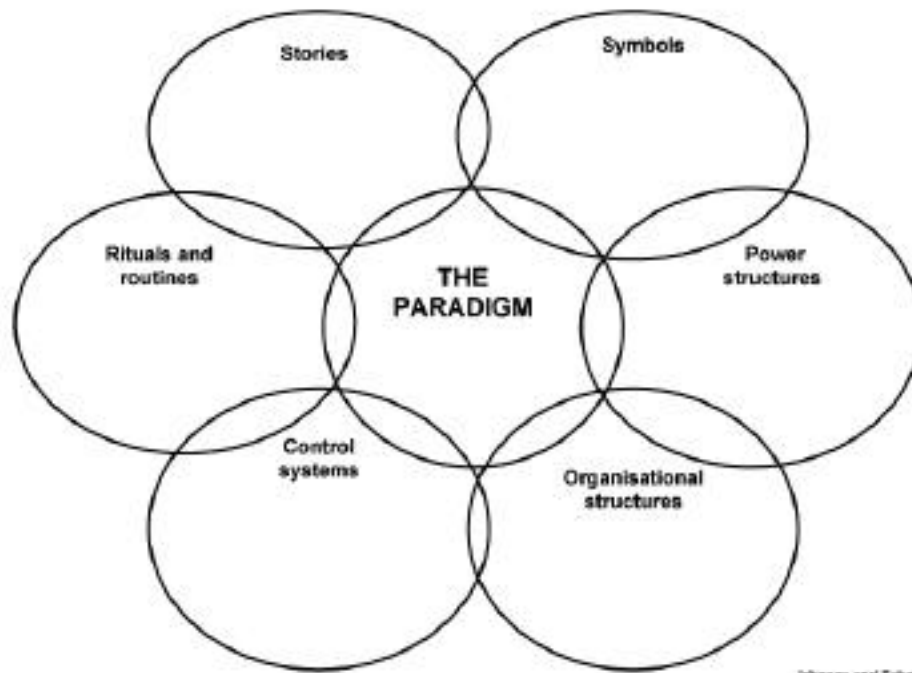
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## Appendix 1

CULTURAL WEB  
Appendix 1

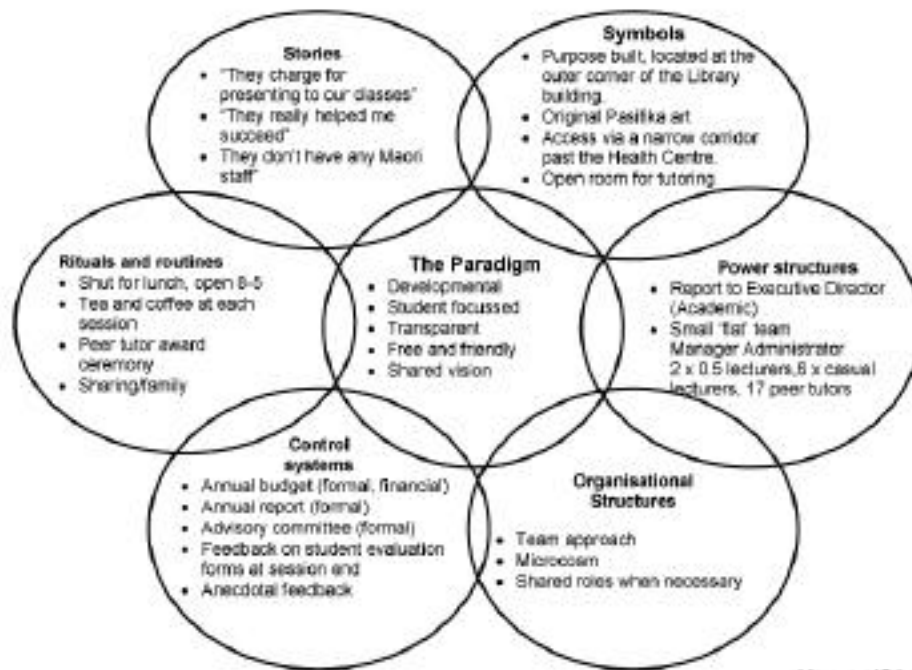


Johnson and Scholes, 1997

## Appendix 2

### CULTURAL WEB: Learning Centre 1997

Appendix 2

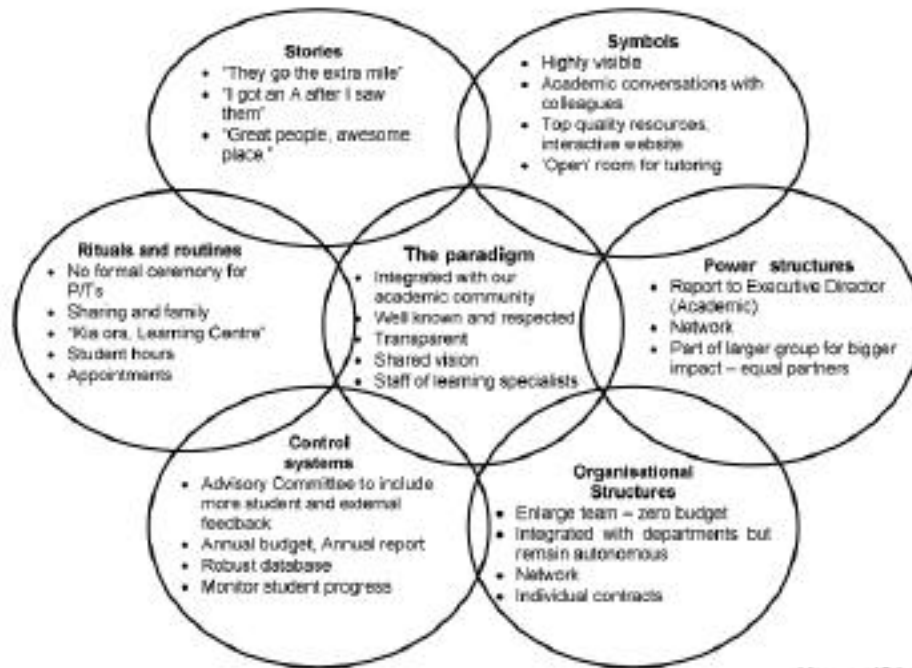


Johnson and Scholes, 1997

## Appendix 3

### CULTURAL WEB: Learning Centre (Desired)

Appendix 3



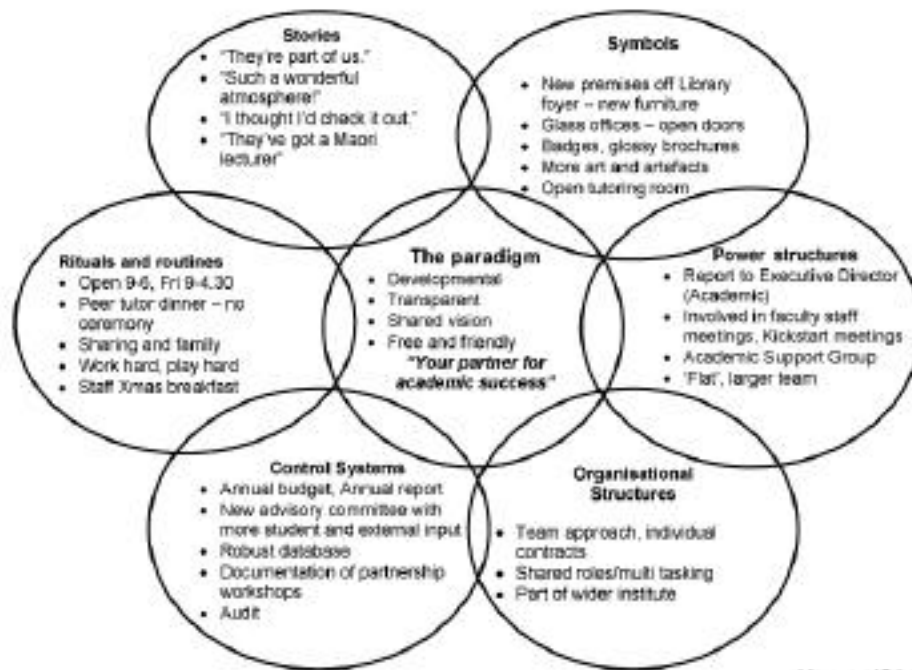
Johnson and Scholes, 1997



## Appendix 4

### CULTURAL WEB :Learning Centre 2001

Appendix 4



Johnson and Scholes, 1997