



Case Study: Establishing Adelaide University

Leading one of the largest and most complex higher-education mergers globally

Context

Between 2022 and 2026, South Australia undertook a once-in-a-generation reform of its higher education system, merging the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia to form **Adelaide University (AU)**. The objective was to create a globally competitive, research-intensive university as a central pillar of the State's economic and innovation strategy.

The merger involved two autonomous institutions, three governing bodies, new legislation, major industrial change, extensive systems integration, and the transition of more than 70,000 students and 8,000 staff — all while maintaining business-as-usual operations.

The Challenge

This was not a conventional merger. It combined:

- Extreme **political and stakeholder sensitivity**
- Immoveable market and regulatory deadlines
- A \$450m program budget and multi-year legislative pathway
- The need to stand up a third institution while two continued to operate (“2–3–1 model”)
- One of the most complex systems integrations ever attempted in higher education

Failure would have had national reputational consequences for the universities and the State.

My Role

I led the merger from inception to Day 1 as:

- **Chief Operating Officer**, University of Adelaide (strategy and feasibility)
- **Project Lead**, Due Diligence and Business Case
- **Executive Director, University Integration**, leading the Integration Management Office (IMO)

I was accountable for:

- Overall program delivery and sequencing
- Governance across three Councils and two Vice-Chancellors
- State Government funding negotiations
- Workforce transition and industrial strategy
- Systems integration oversight and commercial management of the integration partner

Approach and Key Decisions

Key elements of my leadership approach included:

- **Proactive strategy**: positioning the University to shape the merger outcome rather than have it imposed through a Commission process



- **Strong governance design:** clear decision rights across Councils, Steering Committee, IMO, and delivery streams
- **Legislative sequencing:** adopting the “2–3–1” model to de-risk transfer of people, assets, and contracts
- **Disciplined scope control:** maintaining focus on Day 1 readiness while managing inevitable ambition creep
- **People-first execution:** prioritising workforce certainty, consultation, and credibility to maintain operational stability
- **Commercial realism:** balancing a collaborative relationship with the integration partner while holding firm on accountability and cost control

Delivery at Scale

At peak, the Integration Management Office comprised over **400 staff and 200 consultants**, coordinating more than **100 interdependent projects** across five major delivery streams:

- Go-to-Market and brand launch
- Workforce transition and operating model
- Curriculum redesign and accreditation
- Student transition and enrolment
- Systems and digital integration

The program delivered:

- Transfer of **8,000+ staff** with no forced redundancies and no industrial action
- Appointment of **170+ senior leaders**
- Development of **2,000 new courses** and accreditation with 56 professional bodies
- Issuance of **56,000 individual student study plans**
- Migration and consolidation of over **500 systems** into a single enterprise stack

Outcomes

- Adelaide University opened **on time and on budget** on **5 January 2026**
- Received **maximum (7-year) accreditation** from TEQSA
- Secured **\$145m** in direct State Government funding and a **\$320m perpetual investment fund**
- Successfully transitioned students, staff, assets, and contracts
- The foundation universities were disestablished by **31 March 2026**

Independent program leaders described the systems integration as the **largest and most complex** they had encountered globally, delivered in an unprecedented timeframe.

What This Demonstrates

This case study illustrates my capability to:

- Lead **enterprise-wide transformation under intense scrutiny**
- Integrate governance, people, technology, finance, and politics
- Maintain delivery discipline in ambiguous and high-risk environments
- Earn and retain the confidence of Boards, Ministers, regulators, unions, and executives