

# **EIGHT KEY LESSONS FROM US HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## INTRODUCTION

In February 2013 a group of senior managers from five UK universities representing a mix of mission groups, institutional size and experience visited four US public universities in the states of Michigan and Ohio as part of a study visit. The visit aimed to understand the strategic choices being made by individual institutions and to better understand the context in which these strategic choices were being made. Also of interest was the way in which each institution went about strategy implementation. These visits took place at a time of declining state and federal funding and increasing competition for both national and international students. A context not wholly dissimilar to that being experienced by UK HEIs.

The visit was organised by Elementa Leadership an Organisation Development consultancy led by Richard Sharpe. The visiting group membership was Professor Steve West, Vice Chancellor at The University of the West of England, Professor Richard O'Doherty, Deputy Vice Chancellor the University of Gloucestershire; Professor Ian Harvey, Dean of the Faculty of Health and Medicine at University of East Anglia; Professor Val Lattimer, Dean of Nursing Studies, University of East Anglia; Tessa Harrison, Registrar at the University of Southampton and Nicola Owen, Chief Administrative Officer at Lancaster University.

### THE FOUR UNIVERSITIES VISITED WERE:

- University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
- Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo
- Ohio State University, Columbus
- Bowling Green State University, Ohio

### THE AREAS OF INTEREST EXPLORED WERE:

- Institutional strategy, positioning and reputation in the context of reducing state funding
- Research focus and the commercialization of IP (what are the research areas of excellence and how have these been built?)
- Student Affairs/ student experience (the degree to which the student is placed at the heart of institutional thought and action)
- The academic/administrative interface (the effectiveness of the relationship between academics and professional and administrative services)
- Quality of teaching and learning (innovation in teaching and learning/how the quality of teaching is assessed and improved)
- Human Resources/Organisation Development (how the organisation has handled significant changes)



## UNIVERSITY PROFILES

### UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, ANN ARBOR

<b>FOUNDED</b>	1817
<b>RANKING</b>	THE WORLD RANKING 2012-13: 20 <sup>TH</sup>
<b>OPERATING BUDGET</b>	\$5.8BN (2012) INCLUDES MICHIGAN HEALTH SYSTEM
<b>ENDOWMENT</b>	\$7.7BN
<b>RESEARCH EXPENDITURE</b>	\$1.27BN
<b>RESEARCH INCOME</b>	\$900M (APPROXIMATELY)
<b>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>	43,426 OF WHICH 27,979 ARE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

### WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY, KALAMAZOO

<b>FOUNDED</b>	1903
<b>RANKING</b>	U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT RANKING: 189 <sup>TH</sup>
<b>OPERATING BUDGET</b>	\$496M (2012)
<b>ENDOWMENT</b>	\$200M
<b>RESEARCH EXPENDITURE</b>	\$30M (APPROXIMATELY)
<b>RESEARCH INCOME</b>	\$30M (APPROXIMATELY)
<b>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>	24,600 OF WHICH 5,120 ARE POSTGRADUATES

### OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, COLUMBUS

<b>FOUNDED</b>	1870
<b>RANKING</b>	THE WORLD RANKING 2012-13: 53 <sup>RD</sup>
<b>OPERATING BUDGET</b>	\$4.6BN (APPROXIMATELY)
<b>ENDOWMENT</b>	\$2.4BN
<b>RESEARCH EXPENDITURE</b>	\$934M (2012)
<b>RESEARCH INCOME</b>	\$718M (2011)
<b>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>	64,077 OF WHICH 49,195 ARE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

### BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY, OHIO

<b>FOUNDED</b>	1910
<b>RANKING</b>	US NEWS & WORLD REPORT RANKING: 186 <sup>TH</sup>
<b>OPERATING BUDGET</b>	\$283.5M (OPERATING BUDGET 2013)
<b>ENDOWMENT</b>	\$200M
<b>RESEARCH EXPENDITURE</b>	\$7.2M (2010)
<b>RESEARCH INCOME</b>	NOT KNOWN
<b>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>	IN EXCESS OF 20,000 STUDENTS



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Elementa Leadership and UK university senior managers in the visiting party would like to express sincere gratitude to staff at University of Michigan, Western Michigan University, Ohio State University and Bowling Green State University for their openness, hospitality, warmth and also their willingness to share and collaborate around the global 'common cause' that is higher education as a public good.

Whilst some of the institutions visited clearly benefit from significant financial resources and a global reputation, we saw no evidence of complacency. Those institutions visited, not so blessed with this kind of financial security and/or brand distinctiveness were working hard to use the resources they had accumulated, in a focused, efficient and effective way and in a context where the 'margins of error' were often finer and the likely consequences more immediate. This differentiation in the four US universities visited was reflected in the experience of the UK universities represented in the visiting party.



## THE EIGHT KEY LESSONS

### 1. BE CLEAR ABOUT PURPOSE, VALUES AND SOURCES OF DISTINCTIVENESS

Two of the universities visited appeared to be organised around a very strong sense of purpose and supporting values and culture. This appeared to enable these institutions to confidently work with the 'diversity' in the organisation and some element of individual/team autonomy and discretion. It appeared as if the existential reflection and conversations around 'purpose' had already been had and that these two institutions were at ease with themselves in terms of the reasons for their existence and their contribution to the world, the country, their regions and their students. There was a sense that even as the strategic environment gets more turbulent and increasingly uncertain that these two institutions will, in the absence of certainty or 'perfect data' be able to make strategic decisions using their strongly held and institutionally embedded sense of purpose as a guiding compass.

One other University visited appeared a little less confident in defining its core purpose, it seemed as though existential reflection and conversation around "why we exist" were ongoing as reducing state funding, a greater emphasis on student completion and employability and increased competition for diminishing research grants loomed large. This institution seemed to be more guided by an understandable 'efficiency and effectiveness' narrative.

The remaining University visited did not appear to have clarified a clear, compelling sense of purpose which would guide its future success. Neither did it appear to have developed a compensating 'efficiency and effectiveness' narrative. Some individuals at this institution could articulate 'purpose' with real conviction but this appeared not to be widely shared throughout the institution. There was not a sense that any significant systemic conversations were ongoing regarding 'purpose'.

In those universities where there was a defined and shared 'common purpose' the sense of individual identification (staff and students?) with this purpose and therefore the institution itself was palpably stronger than those where 'common purpose' was less evident.

### 2. BUILD A JOINED UP AND EFFECTIVE TOP TEAM

At the University of Michigan and Ohio State University the high calibre of individual executives was evident. A typical salary package of a member of these University Executive teams would likely be between \$200,000 and \$300,000. This would not include the President or Provost who would be earning considerably more. It is reported that President Gordon Gee of Ohio State University had an annual compensation package somewhat in excess of \$1m.



The executives in both of these institutions seemed clear in their accountabilities and key relationships. It appeared as though ‘top team’ meetings were generally where the necessary strategic conversations could be had and that additionally they facilitated the joining up of the university in pursuit of its strategic goals. In both the University of Michigan and Ohio State University the relationship between an externally focused ambassadorial/fund raising President and an internally, organisationally focused Provost seemed to work particularly well. In short the top team roles, relationships and connections seemed to provide the basis for strategic clarity and effective implementation.

The other notable feature regarding the ‘top team’ was the leadership continuity associated with it. In most cases, in the really successful institutions visited, the President and/or the Provost had been in post for at least three or more years. This seemed to have ensured a continuing and constant focus on key priorities and importantly the long term work of shaping and influencing organisational culture. In one institution visited there had been significant and ongoing churn at senior leadership levels. The result of this churn (and lack of continuity) appeared to be playing out in the organisation in terms of focus, standards and energy.

### **3. HIRE A PROVOST AS ‘BRIDGE-BUILDER’**

All the universities visited had a Provost role as Chief Academic Officer. The Provosts encountered took the academic mission as the core of their role and orchestrated a range of academic and administrative staff and services to best support this mission and the academics that were key to its delivery. These role holders were all established academics who had at some point in their careers opted to pursue a managerial route. In this sense there appeared no confusion or lack of clarity in the academic/administrative interface. Indeed the Provosts appeared to act as ‘bridge-builders’ between the academic and administrative communities and as a result it appeared that a productive, solution orientated focus occupied this space. The Provosts seemed to find it relatively easy to identify problems and opportunities and to get the right people around the table to find appropriate solutions. In one institution visited the Provost reported being hampered in his ‘improvement’ activity by a “constraining” relationship with the unions involved and a ‘fragile’ industrial relations environment.

All the Provosts however did acknowledge that the academic-administrative interface was being placed under increasing pressure as, for example, falling state funding and ‘payment on completion’ begin to bite and the focus on efficiency and effectiveness intensifies. This may impact upon the current levels of autonomy, discretion and decentralisation experienced by academic units. Shared services and greater ‘centralisation’ together with unhelpful organisational silos are increasingly points of discussion and some action. Given the latter trends, the integrating/bridge-building role of the Provost may yet become even more important.



#### **4. ALIGN AND ENGAGE WITH YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN**

In Ohio State University and Western Michigan University the strategic plan appeared to drive the organisation. These strategic plans had been developed in a participative way, using ‘Town Hall’ meetings as a means of engagement. The strategic plan became the key focus for the ‘top team’ and this was then aligned with the appropriate definition of accountabilities and performance at a business unit and individual level in an integrated way.

In most cases the Provost’s office stewarded the strategic planning process and ensured that the data and intelligence that informed it was of the highest quality. Whilst in University of Michigan there was less overt evidence of a strategic plan document (which inevitably exists) there was a keen sense of clear organisational priorities and accountabilities and a very strong sense, stronger than any other institution visited, of organisational values. These values held as central the notion of a public research university doing ‘public good’.

At University of Michigan and Ohio State University effort was invested in a ‘bottom up’ approach in which the desired behaviour was incentivised rather than employing a ‘big stick’ approach. Deans of Schools are allowed space to develop plans for their units that align with the overall strategic plan. Accountabilities and performance outcomes seem well articulated. Implementation is left to School management teams who are held accountable for the results they produce, not how they do it. Whilst all cross cutting university initiatives at these two universities seemed not to be mandatory, the benefits and incentives of engagement and participation seemed frequently to outweigh the disadvantages and as a result Deans of School seemed to align their Schools with overall university strategic goals and priorities on a consistent basis. The intent here was to promote innovation and entrepreneurship at a business unit level. Whilst not a clear and neat ‘command and control’ model this does seem to produce a ‘win/win’ climate. In short there was plenty evidence here that these universities were appropriately calibrating where to go ‘tight’ and where to go ‘loose’.

At Ohio State University the ‘cri de Coeur’ was ‘one university’ – an integrated, joined up response to a turbulent, complex and unpredictable world. This was embedded in the strategic logic of the leaders that we engaged with and presumably in the strategic planning process and plans. In short clear strategic thinking and planning were at the core of most universities visited. These plans actually provided the focus and framework for school level innovation and entrepreneurship

#### **5. FOSTER A CULTURE THAT ENABLES IDENTITY, ATTACHMENT AND EXCELLENCE**

In most of the institutions visited it was clear that pursuit of excellence (lack of tolerance of mediocrity) was well embedded culturally. This seemed in part driven by the need to stay high in global league tables and part because people seemed genuinely connected to the history, identity and brand of their university and wanted to ensure it and they could be ‘the



best they could be'. This psychological attachment to and affinity with the identity of the institution seems to be key in retaining profitable relationships with most alumni. Given the number of retail stores selling university merchandise and the numbers wearing university colours this attachment seems to begin on the day the student joins the university and lasts for a lifetime. This is not by accident.

The mind-set of innovation and 'public good' entrepreneurship is actively promoted at most of the universities visited. The organisation (top team) sees its role as creating the cultural conditions in which this can flourish. There is recognition that organisational culture will not be shifted quickly and most of the leadership teams seem to genuinely understand the importance of their own behaviour in modelling the desired culture. Ohio State University recently recruited a talented and experienced HR Director from a leading US Organisation Development consultancy, specialising in organisational culture change.

Ohio State University had also undertaken a 'culture mapping' exercise in which the culture and sub-cultures that constitute the organisation were identified and better understood as a precursor to identifying areas for 'cultural development'.

## **6. RECRUIT AND RETAIN THE BEST**

Recruitment in University of Michigan and Ohio State University was seen to be a critical strategic activity. In University of Michigan the staff recruitment strategy was described as being based on the identification of the candidates they would most like to recruit but who they did not think likely they would get; "then go and get them". The arrangements around recruitment in these institutions appeared robust, demanding and determined.

The philosophy of world class excellence, it seems, starts with recruiting 'excellent' people in the first place. In University of Michigan and Ohio State University it was clear that recruitment and talent management strategies were connected. This manifested itself in a focus on induction and retention. A significant emphasis was placed on induction in these universities. This predicated on induction as being an introduction to how the university worked as a whole, its values and culture and the particular role and its important connections and relationships. Induction appeared not to be treated as another item to be 'ticked off' on an HR check sheet.

In most of the universities visited there was evidence of a serious and significant investment in organisation and staff development. This particularly focused on leadership and management development and performance management. Indeed the general view was of HR operating at a strategic level to develop a culture and capability that would support the strategic plan and future success. In Ohio State University the Director of HR reported directly in to the President and this visibly confirmed to the wider organisation the strategic





importance of recruitment, a focus on developing the culture, talent and performance management.

## **7. GET STUDENT CENTRED**

In our conversations with senior managers the student was rarely constructed as a 'consumer' but their views were clearly listened to and incorporated in to decision making. It seemed that the notion of a 'learning community' made up of different stakeholders and engaging with each other as partners was in operation to a far greater extent than the more transactional model currently being advocated in some UK HEIs.

The focus on 'learning outside of the classroom' was a dominant and galvanising purpose and focus for the various Student Affairs units. Student Affairs functions perceive services as providing the essential co-curricular activities and support that enable their universities to develop responsible citizens. This approach is seen as developmental and as being rooted in advancing the university through building strong communities who stay connected to the universities long after graduation.

All the universities visited seemed genuinely student centred. There was evidence in all institutions of using a focus on students and their experience as the driver for decision making. The Student Affairs Service at University of Michigan prided itself on being research led. They were leading the way in helping the University to think strategically about the future (e.g. presentations on millennial students and the implications for delivery). Regular 'thank you' events held for academic staff involved in supporting students reinforce and celebrate partnership working.

Student Affairs appeared to be concerned to complement the academic experience. The service leads seem to be trying to support students in learning/growing and development and how to use their time at university to become clear about their future 'calling' (not the same as getting a job) and how they define their authentic self (become clear about who they really are). Student Affairs appear committed to student learning and the development of the whole student in a diverse campus community - it's about supporting students' transformation starting with understanding who they are, what their passions are and what contributions they are going to make. It's about adding value to the education and developing how to do less and be with students more - rethinking how technology can be used in balance with physical presence.

## **8. ONLY ACCEPT 'WORLD-CLASS' TEACHING**

At all the universities the expectations on faculty that research and teaching are of equal importance was clear. The underlying assumption is that the best researchers can also be the



best teachers. Faculty are expected to be engaged researchers and engaged teachers and supporters of students.

The research based approach to supporting pedagogic innovation and ensuring that faculty promotion criteria balance research and teaching at the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching was particularly impressive. University of Michigan staff reported cases where individual's promotion opportunities had been delayed and cancelled where their teaching wasn't up to scratch.

The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching seemed to be genuinely innovative in the way that it approached the raising of teaching quality throughout the University. This included extensive 'classroom observation' and the pairing of 'teaching coaches' with members of faculty, who operate in a developmental (not judging or punitive way). The coaching focus is far more on development than evaluation and better engagement and improvement is seen to flow from this. To emphasise the importance and centrality of teaching at University of Michigan, the Provost is actively engaged in teaching. All of this based upon ongoing global research in to leading edge learning and teaching theory and practice.



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#### **ABOUT ELEMENTA LEADERSHIP**

Elementa Leadership is a specialist strategic change and leadership consultancy with cross-sectoral international experience, focused on UK higher education. We are currently working at strategic level with universities that cover the various HE mission groups. We are committed to the future of UK higher education as central to the development of both a better society and a better economy.