

# EMBEDDING INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN UNIVERSITIES

## 12 LIKELY BLOCKS AND INHIBITORS



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### 12 LIKELY BLOCKS AND INHIBITORS

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#### 1. A SHORT TERM AND INTROSPECTIVE PLANNING AND BUDGETING PROCESS

University wide planning and linked budgetary processes that focuses only on the short and medium term and not the longer term often precludes deep curiosity about the long term trends and opportunities related to the global higher education marketplace. This longer term curiosity can produce a reinvigoration of aspiration and organisational purpose but can become discursive and lack a particular call to action. Conversely its absence can have the effect of producing 'stasis' in which the university and its constituent faculties and departments work even harder at doing what they have always done before. This short and medium term focus may produce a default to a focus on a few hard metrics (chasing the NSS or other university league tables for example and thinking of this as a sufficient strategic response to a complex and shifting marketplace rather than using these intelligently as part of how success is measured). This lack of curiosity can manifest itself in terms of the failure to learn from other globally respected universities and their strategic strengths and the way that other sectors have handled complexity and turbulence.

#### 2. TOO MUCH BUREAUCRACY

Individual HEIs can be disabled from agile thinking and action by complex internal governance and committee structures that promote discourse over responding in an appropriate and timely way to external changes. This could and perhaps should involve a greater ability to quickly institute new groupings, run pilots and experiments and learn from these prior to any mainstreaming. Too little overt structure can create a lack of transparency, power politics (where you have to know the unspoken rules) and decisions made through a series of bilateral discussions in a closed system. Where universities have moved to institute workload models as a 'scientific' way of ensuring an equitable distribution of required work and where this has been seen to have been overly bureaucratic, we have also observed a decline (significant in some cases) of discretionary effort, a key innovation ingredient. Finally we have also seen a number of universities introduce programme and project management methodologies to ensure that goals and priorities are actually delivered. We have seen this approach work well where the key projects are selected with care and the project approach used sensibly to deliver. We have also seen this approach applied too dogmatically across all university projects and activities with a result that unadulterated 'PRINCE 2' type approaches become an end in themselves and have crushed the innovation climate.



### **3. LEADERS WHO DON'T GET IT**

We have frequently seen examples of leaders who simply do not understand innovation. They can't see what their contribution might be in fostering an enabling climate and culture. If the Dean of Faculty and/or Heads of Department are unable to intentionally foster an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and innovation to thrive, some great ideas will never be converted into action. Worse through lack of understanding and the application of 'machine like' managerial and leadership assumptions these key leaders may inadvertently give signals that 'innovation is not wanted here'. Senior management role models, mentoring and other leadership development may help here.

### **4. TOO LITTLE DIVERSITY (PARTICULARLY IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND OTHER TEAMS)**

A key to innovation is diversity and the exchange of different perspectives. This exchange provides a vital spark as is continuous challenge to underlying assumptions. It also promotes constructive conflict as a vital 'renewal' ingredient. Some senior teams are not diverse enough and their available thinking 'bandwidth' as a result, is restricted. This can produce sterile discussions in which the substantive issues are not fully discussed and where the avoidance of conflict can be seen as a success criteria.

### **5. A CULTURE OF COMPLACENCY**

This can be associated with a perception that either the institution has abundant resources and/or a privileged market position based upon history or a perception that no resources are available and so innovation is impossible. Whilst confidence and belief in a turbulent world might be both desirable and admirable, blind complacency could, for some, be terminal. We have seen these views permeate some HEIs producing a sense that resources and/or history will always win out. This can de-legitimise the need for entrepreneurship and innovation. Leadership teams need to understand this dynamic and some of its potentially negative consequences and act to counter it. Trading on 'abundance' and/or the past may be no substitute for differentiated quality and impact.

### **6. LACK OF COMPELLING PURPOSE**

It is clear that many HEIs have a strong shared sense of purpose, values or identity and a clear mission. It is also clear that many do not. This lack of clarity (and sometimes passion) around core purpose can produce an array of competing narratives, priorities, initiatives and projects. Those who are most clear about purpose (e.g. the global, national and regional problems we are helping to solve) express this in terms of clear 'vital few' goals and priorities which are appropriately resourced. This generates urgency and acts to galvanise academic and professional service staff around a 'cause worth fighting for'. Compelling purpose also provides the necessary boundary within which entrepreneurship and innovation can take



place. Innovation rarely if ever occurs in a vacuum. A focus on the issues and needs of stakeholders and customers as a part of 'purpose' seems to be key here.

## **7. 'TIGHT' AND 'LOOSE' CONFUSION**

We have seen too much control (tightness) kill attempts to foster innovation. We have also seen too little control (looseness) do the same thing, through lack of necessary prioritisation, co-ordination, boundaries or parameters. What is for the departments, Faculty or the University to deliver vertically through delegation and empowerment and what topics or themes are focussed on horizontally? Calibrating where a university needs to go 'tight' and where it needs to go 'loose' is, in our view, a critical leadership role, yet it is a subject we have not seen commonly and overtly discussed by university 'top teams' as a part of their meetings. The appropriate calibration of the 'tight' and 'loose' (a balance unique to each institution) will have a significant impact upon entrepreneurship and innovation.

## **8. NO RISK APPETITE**

This becomes apparent when one sees a strategic leadership team and/or individual leaders or indeed the planning process itself trying to 'avoid defeat' (contingency or worst case scenario planning) as opposed to 'planning for success'. If leaders are not prepared to take some calculated risks, with failure a possibility, then innovation will surely wither. Related to this is when things do go wrong a process of blaming and/or scapegoating goes on where a process of capturing lessons learnt might be more appropriate and productive.

## **9. LACK OF AN INNOVATION APPROACH OR PROCESS**

We have seen some effective examples of innovation delivered and enabled through a definable and widely disseminated innovation process that acts as a helpful guide for individuals and groups engaged in organisational or departmental improvement activity. This process should facilitate 'ideas into action' and be built around a core set of values/principles. The act of defining and disseminating an organisational approach to innovation signals its strategic importance and where this is based, as we think it should be, upon principles of voice and engagement it can achieve wide legitimacy. Where there is an absence of such a process we have generally seen less productive outcomes. Putting in to place 'task and finish' based groups around carefully selected ideas to be pursued into action can work. Simply putting groups in place and exhorting them to be innovative is not in our view a good solution, particularly when these groups use linear, convergent problem solving approaches. The lack of any definable approach to innovation, however, may be symptomatic of a lack of investment in the required resources to genuinely embed innovation and to move beyond the innovation rhetoric.



## **10. LACK OF REWARD OR INCENTIVE**

We have seen entrepreneurship and innovation actively recognised at various celebratory events. We have not seen much in the way of reward. Some universities, it would appear, are considering the merits of employing aspects of the John Lewis 'Partnership' model in which staff are seen to have a stake in the 'enterprise'. In other sectors innovation and entrepreneurship can be actively incentivised and rewarded. The lack of appropriate incentives and reward (financial and/or non-financial) may be a further innovation inhibitor for UK universities. This might be a candidate for innovative thinking and practice in its own right.

## **11. THE SILO MENTALITY**

We see the silo mentality regularly; the faculty, the department, the professional service defining themselves within boundaries that provide identity but also make these same boundaries impermeable and prevent genuine open collaboration and team working. This can preclude the effective sharing of knowledge and best practice and simply learning from each other. This can apply to both 'internal' and 'external' partner relationships. HEIs need 'bridge builders' not 'tribal war lords' working across these boundaries. Where we have seen 'bridge builders' at work in universities we see new forms of collaboration, new ideas and higher energy. Impermeable tribes and tribal war lords may take time to learn new open behaviours and are the antithesis of the interdependence, collaboration and connectivity that will produce new solutions to old problems.

## **12. LACK OF VALUING OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION**

We have seen evidence of academic entrepreneurship and innovation but rarely have we seen this on a widespread basis institutionally. There may be much more however going on below the 'radar', in itself another inhibitor. We have also seen researchers and scholars struggle under pressure to become more 'business like' as well as seeing attempts by some to stop the entrepreneurship and innovation discourse in its tracks for fear that it is the antithesis of founding enlightenment principles and the 'Trojan Horse' that might introduce unwanted neo-liberal market principles in to the academy. Interpreting entrepreneurship and innovation in this way may produce mental blocks that are simply unnecessary. If we see entrepreneurship more as a state of mind that can be applied across all organisational activities and is centrally concerned with seeing 'ideas into action' in order to fulfil the university's compelling purpose then there is, in our experience, a good chance that a lack of valuing of entrepreneurship and innovation can be removed as an innovation inhibitor.



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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.