

STRATEGY AND CHANGE IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

NAVIGATING IN A TURBULENT WORLD



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WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

The turbulence and uncertainty that seems to characterise the UK higher education sector at the moment is, one might argue, just another chapter in the evolution of institutions that started in medieval monasteries, separated from the church to pursue and disseminate knowledge, and emerged to produce prototypes of the universities we might recognise today at Bologna, Salerno, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge. Despite waves of social, religious, political and economic transformation, universities have resolutely pursued enlightenment principles and the great human project of learning. They go on. We might note the contrast with some other types of organisation, sometimes held up as models to aspire to – companies, for example. The first joint stock companies, such as the Dutch East India Company, were formed a mere 400 years ago and today their typical life expectancy is put at between 40 and 50 years. One third of the companies listed in 1970 had vanished by 1983. Universities have learned to survive and flourish through the centuries; there are very few companies that can make that same claim.

We might also reflect that while we are encouraged to think that contemporary pressures are “unprecedented” or “new”, many of the fierce debates of today have their roots in centuries-old contentions. For instance, what is a university? A place where knowledge and truth are pursued or part of the labour supply chain? Cardinal Newman was ahead of us.

In *The Idea of a University* of 1852, he wrote:

I have been insisting..., first, on the cultivation of the intellect, as an end which may reasonably be pursued for its own sake; and next, on the nature of that cultivation, or what that cultivation consists in. Truth of whatever kind is the proper object of the intellect; its cultivation then lies in fitting it to apprehend and contemplate truth... Now this is what some great men are very slow to allow; they insist that Education should be confined to some particular and narrow end, and should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured. They argue as if everything, as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind. This they call making Education and Instruction "useful," and "Utility" becomes their watchword.

Historical perspective can be a useful antidote to the tendency to think our age is unduly unsettled (or exciting). But that said, the issues of strategic direction and change are unquestionably at the forefront of the collective mind of the higher education sector at the moment. The existence of a market in higher education is bringing with it great concern about institutional survival. But in our travels around UK and US universities, we also observe



a rather more subtle process occurring: the market – a mechanism that appears on the face of it to place weighing, measuring, prices and usefulness as the determining factors in the existence of universities – is stimulating extensive philosophical reflection. Why does this university exist? What do we offer that others do not? Why should students come here? What is our chosen blend of means-to-an-end knowledge and knowledge-as-end? And if it hasn't yet stimulated these discussions, it needs to do so with some urgency. Unless universities can answer these questions clearly and with conviction, all the strategies and change plans will bring little of any lasting value.

ON BEING DIFFERENT

Whatever one thinks about current policy and funding arrangements in higher education, it is a mistake to believe they narrow the array of strategic choices in front of Universities across the board. UK policy, framed in recessionary times, has undoubtedly pushed higher education down an "instrumentalizing" path. But it does not necessarily follow that university strategies must head in the same "instrumentalized" direction. There are choices to be made. Indeed, they must be made.

The questions articulated by Newman need to be addressed by all institutions in the light of their chosen mission groups, histories and priorities. Different institutions will resolve them in different ways. Whilst Oxbridge, Imperial and the Russell Group more generally might feel (rightly or wrongly) that the new HE landscape opens up rather more opportunities than threats, this cannot be a view all HEIs subscribe to. Indeed for other, less obviously research intensive institutions they will need to achieve a subtle and perhaps potentially more challenging "mid-point" position that balances some commitment to the production and dissemination of knowledge whilst strongly emphasising the application of this knowledge in very instrumental terms and combining it with a focus on teaching quality. Crafting something distinctive (and not muddled) here will require imagination and clear thinking. Pursuing "strategies" of "internationalisation" (often reduced to recruiting more foreign students) or focussing on "the student experience" (without being able to define precisely what this actually is or what really is at its core) are likely to be swiftly exposed in a globalised and intensely competitive sector. The risk to these middle ranking universities of a loss of a significant amount of their research income as government looks to fund a much smaller pool of research intensive institutions (aka Russell Group) appears very real.

There will be some others who have little choice regarding knowledge production and who might have to make a virtue of the instrumental ends they deliver. These latter institutions may, if they are not careful, risk looking like expensive further education colleges. Being clear about which point one occupies on this continuum may well be the defining act of a strategic planning process. The choices (or non-choices) made will also have profound implications for external stakeholders and partners and for the state of the psychological contract between individual institutions and their academic communities.



It is unlikely that the market will lead to a preponderance of “teaching factory” universities, solely preoccupied with the employability of their students, important as this undoubtedly is. Rather, greater variegation in the sector as a whole is to be anticipated, as individual institutions attempt to define distinctive and nuanced positions. Clear strategic thought and a passion for and commitment to a core set of distinguishing values may be key here.

WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIC DILEMMAS AND CHOICES?

Having decided what kind of a university one wants to aspire to be, the task of defining the appropriate mix and quality of research, teaching and knowledge exchange should become somewhat easier – as, indeed, should determining whether the focus is to be global, local or a combination of the two. Of course, if the discussion around “the idea of the university” was insufficiently robust or inclusive, and/or was not underpinned by clear values, it still may render the management team lost in a changing landscape without a compass for guidance. In these circumstances reflections on the appropriate “mix” of strategic ingredients could be somewhat random. Strategic drift and accompanying mediocrity may be the consequence. This lack of clarity around strategic purpose then frequently plays out when implementation is attempted; “change” becomes a bedlam of competing priorities, ad hoc projects and initiatives that flare briefly and fizzle fast.

So step forward two little words – oft-repeated, much abused, faintly Orwellian-sounding – but essential in order to turn values into plans and to make change stick: strategic planning.

For too long strategic plans have been solely identified with the writing and production of a document. Sometimes it appeared that satisfying the governance requirement for having a strategic plan was the real point of it all; once the box was ticked the job was done. What can be missed in the rush to publish the strategic plan is the ability of a strategic planning process to re-engage an employee population. The kind of strategic planning appropriate to a university setting should be an inclusive process – a dialogue in which staff and stakeholders have a voice. It is a means through which universities can respond to the external environment by gathering data, clarifying goals and priorities and associated resource requirements, and which can guide and inform decisions about what to start, stop and continue doing. Strategic plans can also provide other important benefits in terms of building shared vision that can promote a real sense of purposeful community. They can even help shape organisational culture, provided the process is inclusive enough and leaders behave in ways that are clearly aligned with professed values. The tension here is usually between “one size fits all” and “letting a thousand flowers bloom”. But it is also about the extent to which the management team sees strategic planning not as something which it “owns” but as an opportunity to express collective purpose and to invite others to contribute.

An inclusive strategic planning process can, in short, create a tangible sense of “we” that replaces the corrosive narrative of “them and us”. This may help to prevent the familiar story of documents gathering dust on shelves while the wider university carries on much as before.



Sometimes, universities appear to lack a degree of confidence in strategic planning. They think they need to import models from other sectors, as if looking for tips from the masters. But it is important to remember that while universities may well need to become more “business like” they are, we would argue, not “a business”. They need the courage and the confidence to develop strategic planning in ways that are uniquely appropriate to their academic institution. Approaches based upon voice and dialogue and respect for diversity are, in our view, far more likely to carry the academic community with them and arguably have the additional benefit, in their emergent quality, of being more relevant to the shifting external environment.

HOW TO DO CHANGE IN UNIVERSITIES (THE DIPLOMATIC WAY)

All of this does not begin to capture the deep institutional trauma the sector is undergoing. The need to control costs, make cuts and raise quality is pushing more urgent issues than positioning and planning up the agenda: how to do strategic change.

Change in higher education settings is inevitably difficult because traditions of academic independence are so strong and because universities are typically complex, de-centralised organisations with departments, faculties and schools enjoying semi-autonomy. The creation of a market in higher education is having the effect of flushing out ancient suspicions between managers and academics, in some instances triggering a kind of authority-resistance spiral, as one group launches initiatives which the other does its best to thwart. In the worst cases, institutions are on the brink of civil war.

The faultlines are fast emerging.

From a manager’s perspective, the needs of a market-facing, consumer-oriented organisation must be prioritised and in the current climate that means standardising the product, centralising resources, and measuring efficiency and effectiveness. Costs and quality can then be managed better. If student choice determines survival, widely different practices in different faculties can no longer be tolerated. What the university offers must be consistent.

From the academic perspective, meanwhile, independent scholarship risks being irredeemably crushed by this agenda. University leadership teams seem to be not so much creeping towards managerialism, but galloping at full tilt towards it. Academics are experiencing repeated waves of change in which they feel like victims rather than participants. Their expertise is being commodified. They feel like they are no longer part of a community of scholars but of “a brand”. Communication in many universities is akin to picking up a loudhailer. And the impact of various interventions is that academic staff seem to lack support in faculties and are spending increasing amounts of time on administrative tasks – standing in photocopier queues or attending internal meetings. As one lecturer put it to us, “why can’t they just leave us alone?”



It is naive to imagine “they” can. So profound a transformation of the higher education landscape was always bound to unleash massive organisational change underneath, in turn affecting the experience of being a university employee. The clash of perspectives invokes deep anguish about the identity and social role of universities. Ultimately, it may be that the experience of being a 21st century UK academic is less attractive in some dimensions to that of a 20th century counterpart. It might also, however, create opportunity for the hitherto frustrated “entrepreneurial academic”.

So what is the right way to go about change when academics and administrators appear to be on something of collision course?

There is no answer that will be appropriate in every case, but it does seem to us that universities frequently fail to find the right approach to the process of change. The old dilemma of where to go “tight” and standardise (one size fits all) and where to go “loose” enabling and encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation

It seems to us that there are three broad approaches to this academic/administrative interface currently being applied:

Model One: Command and Control (Don’t Trust the Academics)

Model Two: Avoidance / Consulting to the Void (Don’t upset the Academics)

Model Three: Partnership, Fusion and Collaboration (Let’s Work Together)

The “industry standard” appears in general to be a combination of Model One and Model Two: don’t trust and don’t upset. In fact, the appetite for top-down, command-and-control style change programmes is surprising in a sector where value resides in the knowledge, talent and experience of academic staff. “Getting it through” appears to take precedence over whether the change is perceived as legitimate. Obviously, sapping goodwill in this way can make future change more difficult. One does not need highly developed critical skills to spot a rubber-stamping exercise wearing the garb of a consultation. In our experience, the principle that the people closest to an organisational problem have important insights to contribute to its solution is honoured more in the breach than in the practice in many university strategic change exercises.

Yet if some current approaches to change have the potential to exacerbate “them and us” paralysis, it remains increasingly apparent that those universities which are able to maintain positive and constructive relationships between academics and administrators are in a position of considerable competitive strength. It is our view that the quality of the academic/administrative interface will largely determine future organisational effectiveness. Where relations are trusting and respectful, institutions are more agile in their reactions to the external environment, they find change easier and make better decisions.



Readers who have made it thus far in this paper will not be surprised to learn that in our view Model Three is clearly superior. Too few executive teams seem to be choosing it at present. This is not to underestimate the challenge of engaging with a wary often critical academic population. But if partnership and fusion are the most appropriate routes to mutually beneficial solutions then higher education institutions will need more courageous “bridge builders” able to fuse the best of the academic with the best of the administrative. These “bridge-builders” need to step into the heart of these tensions and difficult conversations, being credible with all parties and determined to bring about positive outcomes through collective innovation and problem solving.

“Bridge builders” help to join the whole organisation up. To accept the compromise of anything short of a real fusion is to consign an institution to perpetual strife and mediocrity. Universities need to put their best “bridge builders” in critical roles and not slot in the candidates who simply appear convenient. “Bridge-builders” foster dialogue and understanding as a precursor to developing solutions, through collective endeavour, that are equally valued by all of the stakeholders.

IN CONCLUSION: DYNAMIC STABILITY

If so much about the future of HE seems uncertain, this much is clear: the new norm is most unlikely to be placid. This is true whether one’s vision of the university owes more to Cardinal Newman or to Lord Browne. However, as more universities decide they have no option but to embark on strategic change (for some more radical than others), their range of choices about how they do it is much greater than they think. Setting up and committing to a process of genuine dialogue not only has a better chance of creating more constructive professional-academic relationships, but also of better decision-making as well. The best kinds of dialogue around change alter outcomes too, as new possibilities emerge and unintended consequences get aired earlier. Strategy needs to be conceived not just as a matter of which decisions to take regarding the future, but also about the way in which change will be handled. A change programme that pleases professionals but causes a rupture in the psychological contract with academics ultimately amounts to an unsustainable situation because ultimately it is, we believe, academic endeavour that makes for “world class” institutions and positive student experiences.

In concluding, our seven key strategic questions for UK universities are therefore:

1. What is the “idea” for your university?
2. How good is the fit between your institution and its operating environment?
3. What will your strategic planning process look like and who will be involved?
4. What is your “change model”?
5. Where will you need to go “tight” and where “loose”?
6. Do you have enough “bridge builders” and are they in the right places?
7. How much discretionary effort is volunteered in your institution (compared to others)?



Sometimes modern management thinking stresses the need to find solutions and not to identify the right questions. This is a piece of advice universities could safely ignore in our view. In Socratic vein, we believe the questions (and the dialogue they produce) to be as important as the “answers”. The “how” is just as valuable as the “what”.

Some UK institutions are already demonstrating a sophistication and intelligence around how they undertake strategic planning and change that bodes well for their individual institutions. We have also been fortunate enough to meet a number of exemplary “bridge builders” on our travels around UK and US higher education. In these institutions there is a sense of quiet confidence, purpose and direction. In too many, however, there is anxiety and discord and too much energy is being expended in fighting internal battles. Pace Cardinal Newman, even in a market system universities are ideas worth getting passionate about.



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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.