As I approach retirement after nine years as chief executive of the Leadership Foundation, I hope I’m allowed one or two reflections on how the sector has changed in that period and the ways in which leaders have had to adapt their game. I preface it with a health warning. However momentous we think current changes are, they may only seem a blip when viewed against the backdrop of 800 years of higher education!

I attended my first UUK members’ meeting in December 2003, when there really was a sense of crisis. The debate was in full swing over round one of the fees debate – the plan that nearly sank the Blair government. But under the wise guidance of the then president, Professor Sir Ivor Crewe, the members found a consensus and the ensuing formula of fees was adopted and internalised by the sector.

In truth the ‘Blair era’ of higher education was a period of great plenty, witnessing the restoration of very positive funding levels for teaching, research and capital spend – with perhaps some exceptions in the devolved administrations. For much of the first decade of the new century, yet more new universities were coming into being, mainly from the higher education colleges, and new institutions coming into being were no threat to existing players. The story was largely of growth, particularly in international non-EU students. It was also a period when politicians were largely supportive of universities, and concepts of autonomy and academic freedom were unchallenged. The sector could plan with a degree of certainty, even if global competition and economic clouds were appearing on the horizon.

Nine years on, it feels very different. I think the outlook was best summed up by Professor David Eastwood’s chosen dinner debate topic at a meeting of the Leadership Foundation board: “Leading in a world where the past is no longer a guide to the future”. Wherever you are in the UK, there is a sense of uncertainty – too many ‘unknown unknowns’. In England there is a formula (with ramifications for the rest of the UK) whose main characteristics are its unpredictable and unforeseen consequences. In Wales the government is – rightly or wrongly – adopting a national and regional approach towards higher education, which has interesting implications for university autonomy. In Scotland we have a unique debate on governance. Almost anywhere in the UK there is challenge to how universities should be run, whether from the point of view of funding, competition, governance or autonomy. It has stimulated a much wider debate about the value for money of higher education, the return on students’ personal investment, and indeed the question, raised by the tabloids, of whether it really is worth going to university as a conventional 18-year-old undergraduate. It is a world where new providers – cheaper, less ‘sophisticated’, whether from the private sector or further education – could be a real threat.

What does all this mean for leadership in the sector? The critical skill is about managing uncertainty, coping with emergent change, as opposed to planned strategy development. There is a need for more agile approaches to scenario planning; one of the most popular research outputs of the Leadership Foundation is our report on scenario planning. Above all, the challenge is to be able to create a more entrepreneurial and enterprising culture in the institution without losing the concept and values of the university.
All of this raises wider issues about the extent to which we have a sufficient leadership and management capability for handling this scale of change. There are other questions about the need to rethink the business model for universities as they shift from public funding to an increasing reliance on private resources. Much of this also requires innovative thinking about new forms of collaboration within the sector, and indeed with private and public institutions outside the sector and internationally.

We also need to assess whether we still are one sector or a looser form of multi-faceted system where alliances and groupings characterise the landscape. Leadership of a much more agile and loosely connected system is a tough challenge. It represents a serious step change for those used to the more collaborative and consensual sector which has built up in the last 50 years. It is axiomatic that leading collaborations, partnerships and alliances is a tougher call than leading a single institution.

This is all leading us to ask what universities are really for. It’s a question which is being crowded out by the urgency of debate about the marketisation of higher education and the restructuring of the sector. Handling this debate requires an even stronger national leadership for UK higher education, which is very tough to maintain in a sector which is fragmenting.

We’ve taken the message of effective leadership a long way in nine years and we are currently addressing all these challenges. But I feel my successor has plenty of scope to take it further!

Ewart Wooldridge CBE
Chief Executive
Leadership Foundation for Higher Education
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