Adaptive Capability in Higher Education Institutions

A Small Development Project funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

Final Report

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Abstract

UK Higher Education institutions have proved themselves capable of transformational change on shorter timescales than their reputation would typically indicate. We present four case studies of Universities that undertook significant change on a timescale of two to four years. Some of these changes were prompted by crises, particularly of finance, others involved reassessment and remodelling of the institution’s mission and identity. The organisational capabilities that allowed these institutions to be adaptive would be familiar in any discussion of change management and organisational agility. These are:

Clear-sighted and personally committed senior leadership, investing substantially in the process; attention to the skill set and membership of leadership and governance bodies; a planning and communication process that involved a wide range of University staff (although interestingly with less explicit involvement of students than many interviewees thought ideal); alignment of processes and systems to support new identities.

All of the case studies represent success stories, and doubtless other institutions would rise to similar challenges, but the key to success in a less predictable environment may be to develop the relevant systems and cultures of adaptability on an ongoing basis. This requires substantial investment of leadership energy and is likely to be more difficult in times of less stark crisis.
1 Introduction

This project aimed to:

- Identify the fundamental building blocks of leadership, culture, process and structure that would enable Universities\(^1\) to act with more organisational agility
- Learn how leadership can be effective in helping HEIs to adapt rapidly to a new environment

Rationale

The environment in which HEIs operate is becoming more volatile, with changes to funding and Government policy driving changes to both income and stakeholder expectations. It is possible that the sector faces the greatest turbulence that it has experienced in recent decades, and University leaders perceive a need to become more flexible and adaptive to flourish or indeed survive in the future. Higher Education is not a sector known for its ability to change quickly, by contrast with other industries where strategic agility is a core competence of successful firms. There are however examples of adaptive change in higher education (see e.g. Sporn, 1999; Clark, 1998, 2004).

In this context, we distinguish between organisational adaptability and agility, although in everyday conversation the terms are often used interchangeably. Adaptability refers to the ability of an organisation to transform itself in response to changed environmental signals or opportunities, and therefore to survive and thrive in a different environment. Agility refers to an organisation that is able to react quickly to new opportunities and threats, to protect itself and succeed. An organisation may be agile without necessarily transforming itself, and may undergo adaptation on long timescales that wouldn’t be considered agile.

Approach

We have focused on the capability of HEIs to be adaptive, which on a long (decadal) timescale they undoubtedly are, as a precursor to understanding how they may be more agile. To do this we have investigated how a few HEIs have successfully undergone adaptation in timescales driven by circumstance to be shorter than they are traditionally comfortable with.

There is considerable convergence in the literature on the factors which tend to influence effectiveness and efficiency of change processes, and many Universities have a track record of successful change. Is the challenge for HEIs to be able to take established change models and apply them more quickly? Or is the question a more fundamental one of whether Universities can and should change their structure and working practices to become more like so-called agile industries?

Our approach, given a small project team and limited resources, was to establish what the organisational research literature says about the characteristics of agile or adaptable

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\(^1\) We use the terms “HEI and “university” interchangeably in this report, referring to any Higher Education Institution whether Univer
organisations, focusing on well-documented examples from other industries and the Higher Education sector overseas (for example the USA). We then approached a number of case study institutions which had recently (over the last 2-4 years) undertaken pervasive transformation exercises. Our question was: “Whatever happened here, why did it happen that way?” We did not set out to test any particular model of organisational adaptability or change, but did structure our interview questions around key themes that arise in the literature:

- Leadership
- Strategic sensitivity and awareness of possibility
- (Flexible) organisation and redistribution of resources

The project team enjoyed thorough and frank discussions with a wide range of staff in the case study interviews. This has allowed a rich insight into how significant organisational change has been achieved in higher education institutions. A number of common themes have arisen, which may at first glance appear to reproduce “text book headings,” but it has struck both team members and conference audiences that these are not recognisable as common practice in most HEIs. The team has been able to draw consistent conclusions across the four case studies, although the circumstances were different in each case. Acquiring narratives about these processes in HE-native language has been the key achievement of the project to date.

2 Literature summary

The organisational studies and higher education literature shows us a rich vocabulary of terms that all denote change. There is mention of terms like evolution, revolution, transformation, adaptation, adjustment, innovation and incremental change. As noted earlier, we are interested in adaptive change (change processes that go beyond piecemeal adjustments) and agility (organisations quickly reacting). Adaptive organisational change of this kind relates to the strategic direction, the organisational structure, leadership and governance, and/or organisational culture. Obviously, these elements are interrelated. Eckel et al.’s (1998) definition: “Transformation (1) alters the culture of the institution by changing underlying assumptions and overt institutional behaviours, processes, and structures; (2) is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; (3) is intentional; and (4) occurs over time” comes close to the kind of change we are interested in. This definition would also allow us to leave aside publications that focus on lean management. Although this concept resonates with agility and competitiveness (gaining market shares, satisfying customer needs), it appears that the lean management literature in higher education largely focuses on streamlining processes (see e.g. Balzer, 2010) and as such deals largely with incremental change.

Although a definition like Eckel et al.’s does reflect our interest, we feel this definition and others neglects somewhat the change agents and strategy aspects of change. We therefore have made use of the Doz & Kosonen’s (2008) fast strategy framework, consisting of:

- strategic sensitivity (heightened strategic alertness, high quality information, open strategy process)
- collective commitment of the leadership (top team renewal, working together as a team, shared agenda and mutual dependency, leadership style and capabilities)
- resource fluidity (mobility of capital and people, modularity, resource access)

The proposed framework is not fully at odds with the higher education literature on change. Some of the agility elements are discussed by the higher education researchers as well or could easily be connected to the three elements. With respect to strategic sensitivity, Toma (2010) discusses the importance and availability of (relevant) information. With respect to leadership issues, Kezar and Eckel (2002ab) and Eckel and Kezar (2003) emphasise collaborative leadership and Sporn (1999) speaks of supportive leadership and collegiality. Resource fluidity is less stressed in the higher education literature, probably because it is typically a private sector concept that may not resonate perfectly with the way higher education operates (as publicly funded and government-accountable institutions). That said, the notion of resource access comes close to what Clark (1998, 2004) terms the differentiated funding base.

3 Case Study methodology

Lacking the resources to attempt a comprehensive study of a wide range of HEIs, the project team settled on a small number of case studies that fulfilled the criteria:

- Have recently undergone pervasive, fundamental change (touches every aspect of the business)
- Are willing to take part in the study, and able (very kindly) to facilitate a study visit.

A member of the project team visited each institution for a day, during which time they were able to conduct semi-structured interviews of up to an hour with a range of people who had experienced and / or been actively involved in the transformation. Some interviews were conducted later by telephone. The interviewees included Vice-Chancellors of three of the institutions (although two of them had not been Vice-Chancellor at the time of the story), other members of the top management team, academic and professional services staff, Trade Union representatives and students. In total, the team carried out 26 interviews.

4 Case study summaries - “What happened here?”

The details of individual interviews remain confidential to the project team and the institutions involved, but the following summaries provide a factual timeline and explanation of why the Universities undertook transformation exercises, and the general outcomes of those exercises.

4.1 University of Cumbria

The University of Cumbria was formed in 2007 following the Harris Report into Higher Education in Cumbria, and was achieved by the merger of St Martin’s College (Lancaster),
Cumbria Institute of Arts (Carlisle), and the Cumbrian assets of UCLAN. The University was created with a significant operating deficit, but developed an ambitious business plan predicated on growth and substantial external investment. Unfortunately the political and financial context changed dramatically, and by the time a new Vice-Chancellor was appointed in April 2010, the deficit was unmanageable. The financial crisis faced by the University of Cumbria at that time has been recognised as probably the starkest of any HEI in the UK; it was widely cited in the press as being close to bankruptcy, and placed in special measures by HEFCE.

The strategic response to the crisis, starting from a review of the academic plan, was to achieve significant cost reductions, predominantly in pay, and to develop a sustainable academic offer. In practice this meant restructuring from 5 to 3 academic faculties, consolidating staff and students onto main campuses, mothballing or disposing of peripheral sites and divesting FE programmes to other providers. There was also a review and restructure of support and management services, and the whole was facilitated by a substantial voluntary severance scheme. The change programme was initiated in January 2010, and led by a number of new senior managers including interim appointments to VC, Finance Director and Director of Human Resources posts.

By autumn 2011, with a new permanent VC at the helm (from August), the University had reduced its staffing costs by 20%, and staff numbers from 1850 to 1100, and achieved a modest operating surplus. It was taken off HEFCE’s at-risk register, was recording improved positions in staff and student satisfaction surveys. Audits by QAA and OFSTED had positive outcomes. Against these indicators of success are reported unintended, but perhaps unsurprising, outcomes, including a pervasive sense of “change fatigue”, burnout and survivor syndrome typical of organisations that have undergone significant downsizing, plus the business risks inherent in having new processes and systems throughout the organisation.

4.2 University of West London

The University of West London draws on a heritage of 150 years in teaching and professional education. First founded as the Lady Byron School in 1860, the institution as it exists today was originally formed from the merger of Ealing College of Higher Education, Thames Valley College of Higher Education, the London College of Music and Queen Charlotte’s College of Health Care Studies.

The case study focuses on the changes that took place following the arrival of the institution’s new Vice-Chancellor, Professor Peter John in 2007. At this point key drivers for change were evident, and summarised as follows:

- The strategy for ‘seamless’ progression from Further Education to Higher Education was proving unsuccessful
- The institution was fragmented and did not function as an aligned organisation
- The institution was on the HEFCE Risk Register, and had been since 1998 and a failed OFSTED inspection (Reading College provision)
• The institution was financially unstable:
  o 84% of its income was spent on staff
  o Further Education lecturers were on Higher Education contracts
  o There were decreases in student numbers
• A high proportion of undergraduates joined through clearing and there was a high non-completion rate
• Buildings were poorly utilised
• The effectiveness of the Governing Body was questioned

The key changes were the University completing the divestment of its site in King's Road, Reading, (now known as Reading College) in July 2010, having formally changed its name and rebranded to The University of West London in April 2011. In addition to these major changes the University also:
  • Changed the Governing Body and Vice-Chancellor's Executive Team membership
  • Closed the Slough campus in 2010
  • Cut costs through a reduction of 200 staff and the estate, making better use of facilities
  • Restructured Central Services to ensure alignment to the new institutional strategy, creating clear operational plans
  • De-layered the organisation, moving away from 3 Faculties to Schools reporting directly into the Vice-Chancellor's Executive Team.
  • Established improved access to and use of data to inform decision making (set up Planning Office)

All interviewees described the institution as being a far better place than it was before 2007, having benefited from the strong leadership and direction from the Vice Chancellor. In support of the case study interviews the hard data shows a significant improvement in the institution's performance:

  • Staff costs have reduced to 52%
  • Improved utilisation of the estate and facilities
  • Previously received 70% of undergraduate students through clearing – now 15%
  • Applications have increased by 117%
  • Turned around attrition / non-completion rates (from 29% to less than 20%)
  • Removed from HEFCE Risk Register after 14 years
  • In a stable financial position with funds available to reinvest (c. £40M)
  • Clear brand and identity

4.3 Bournemouth University

Bournemouth University was in many ways a successful institution with a focus on teaching a range of vocationally-oriented degrees, some of which were among the most highly regarded in their field. A new Vice-Chancellor (from 2005/6) identified the need to refocus the University’s identity in anticipation of a more competitive, market-like environment in
which peer institutions would be able to compete for good students on the basis of academic excellence. A steady decline in the teaching income was also predicted to be unsustainable. Consequently the senior management introduced a strategy of change towards an “academically-led, financially robust” way of working.

This vision involved a number of fundamental and structural changes, particularly the articulation of an academic model in which students would be “taught by people who are themselves learning.” To achieve this, emphasis was placed on academic staff having a balance of capability across the key academic practices of research, education, professional practice and enterprise. In practice, this required transformation of the academic workforce to a more research-active one by development of existing staff, voluntary redundancy of others, and recruitment of staff with more established portfolios of academic activity. It also required changes to the working patterns of many academics and other staff.

In parallel with and following this, Professional Services were restructured, consolidating from 24 services to five directorates, and various changes were made to the management structure and academic model. More cross-University support and consistent systems were introduced to allow researchers to compete for external funding and form relationships with the commissioners of research.

Subsequently, under a new Vice-Chancellor, BU has developed a new Fusion vision of the “three areas of academic practice” which encourages high performance of rounded academics and a student experience that also includes engagement with education, research and professional practice. The transformational work of the earlier change has provided the platform from which the University is now able to build on its new vision.

Various indicators provide evidence that this was a beneficial journey for BU:

- Substantial improvement across a range of league tables, including being the UK's Number One New University according to the 2009 & 2010 editions of The Guardian University Guide, and substantial rises in other league tables (including the greatest improvement of any English university in the Times table over 2001-2010. )
- Fourth most improved University in the country for the quality of research, according to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008.
- Outcomes of staff and student surveys improved in 2012.

4.4 Plymouth University

Plymouth University was also an institution without an obvious threat to its existence, being successful by many measures, and was following a track to grow the research side of its activity. The case study focuses on the changes generated by the University’s Strategic Plan for 2009-2012. This followed a period of reflection brought about by the sudden death of a previous Vice-Chancellor. During the aftermath of this unexpected event and with the leadership of the new Vice-Chancellor, the University undertook a review of the way in which it was led, and decided to develop a more distributed style of leadership: one that did not rely on the charismatic vision of one, or a small group of people, but devolved and dispersed responsibility across the institution. The key change discussed by all participants was the
University’s passion for ‘developing an innovative and creative culture that empowers people’. The vision was developed by a process of consultation to establish what the University and its stakeholders considered to be its “essence.” It was subsequently captured in the strapline ‘the enterprise university’.

Key factors to the achievement of this vision were described by participants as:

- Focusing the University’s Change Academy team on the development of inter-related University wide projects to develop an enterprise-enabling culture. The group recognised that whilst they could be a catalyst to engage, influence and involve others, the changes that needed to be achieved in the institution to realise the strategy could not be achieved by a small group alone. So they developed the concept of the Enterprise Enablers.

- A group of around 60 staff across the institution were either nominated, or volunteered, to become ‘Enterprise Enablers’ because they were excited about enterprise. A series of cafe forum sessions and lunches with senior staff encouraged the Enterprise Enablers to consider how they could make a difference. Ideas were encouraged and they were given the confidence and space to develop them and to consider how they would align to the strategic vision, whilst recognising that not all ideas could be implemented.

- The atmosphere of ‘change readiness’ created by the Change Academy and the Enterprise Enablers served to communicate to others the value of ‘new ways of doing’, with the activities of the Enterprise Enablers, in particular, designed to spread in a viral fashion. Although the Enterprise Enablers were initially mentored and had privileged access to senior members of staff, they did not become an elite group and others were free to join them as they became inspired by their colleagues.

- More recent initiatives include working in partnership with students on change initiatives, and reducing the bureaucracy associated with systems such as budgeting and accounting to become more nimble and agile in using financial resources where and when they are needed, rather than being stifled by an annual accounting framework.

- The University has also adopted a new and distinctive visual identity which emphasises active verbs, replacing a static logo with a sense of movement which is not without its critics and risks.

Plymouth now enjoys a status as one of the top ten universities in the country under the age of 50 by *Times Higher Education*, and 318th in the world overall by the same publication. It has 12 National Teaching Fellows; is the overall best performing university in the People and Planet Green League for sustainability; and in 2008 was selected by the Royal Statistical Society to host its Centre for Statistical Education.
5 Conclusions: common features of adaptability in case study HEIs

5.1 Leadership – including planning and realising change

All the case studies revealed the influence of determined and committed senior leaders, both Vice-Chancellors and other members of senior management teams. A unifying factor was that transformation required very clear purpose and energy to follow things through, and individual VCs displayed substantial commitment of their own time. This included visiting departments, holding staff “town hall meetings,” leading large group planning events and in general being available and visible to staff and students. Throughout these appearances the VCs in question were clear about the overall direction of transformation and visibly supportive of actions to achieve change, whether or not this risked damaging their individual popularity.

Most of the cases involved a change of individuals at the highest levels of governance and management. Several cases report the importance of refreshing and expanding the skills and experience available to the senior leaders of HEIs who needed to grasp and communicate the need for change. In some cases, this included removing individuals whose skills did not meet the challenges, or indeed did not allow them to understand or commit to the drivers for change. Other cases report powerful individuals who had a large personal stake in the status quo, who proved difficult but essential to remove. In one case the drastic and dramatic changes required temporary appointments of highly skilled individuals. Indeed, there was a view that where very difficult decisions need to be driven through (for example substantial job losses), it may be advantageous to have an interim manager make the unpopular choices and take the criticism. Such leadership may, however, be less sympathetic to the long-term morale in the institution, and thus take less care to build and maintain trust and respect.

Successful leaders of adaptation were seen to be those who were credible – transmitted a sense that they knew what they were doing - and able to communicate to all levels of staff that things would be all right after the change.

In some cases there was a noticeable role for senior professional staff who were not perhaps identifiable as the senior leaders of the organisation. They were often involved in drawing together ideas into coherent form and making detailed implementation plans, or in close advisory and collaborative relationships with senior leaders. Although most interviewees would assert that clear and visible leadership was essential, the role of these professional staff should not be under-estimated, and they often had the most impact when they were close to the senior team.

Despite the importance of key high-level individuals, all case institutions report various approaches that sought to engage and involve staff from across all areas of the University. These included:

- A “diagonal slice” team working through the Change Academy methodology to set out visions and mechanisms to drive the transformation
- Open meetings involving all staff, to generate ideas about how the central vision might be realised
• Senior managers being available for “coffee bar conversations” and similar informal discussions
• Faculties being asked to provide plans that would enable them to deliver their share of the vision, rather than being told specifically what to change
• Facilitated planning sessions, often with senior managers taking key roles, that captured staff views of proposed changes

The way senior leadership teams worked together was also cited as instrumental to success in most cases. The process of developing a change strategy was itself a team-building process, and new chief executives and a refreshing of leadership teams led to different, more collaborative working practices in some cases.

If there are any surprises here they are the sheer amount of personal time committed by senior leaders and the amount and intimacy of the opportunities for staff to be involved in consultation, visioning and planning for change. Conference delegates and colleagues in our institutions have expressed the rarity of such behaviour in many HEIs.

5.2 Strategic sensitivity

In all cases, the decision to undertake significant adaptation and transformation was prompted by a crisis. In the case of Cumbria and UWL, the financial situation was clearly and evidently unsustainable, and there was a fully ignited burning platform. In the other cases, the Universities were not in imminent danger of collapse, but something prompted the senior management to reconnect with the purpose of the institution and the space of possibilities for the future. Questions were in all cases raised about why the governors and senior managers of the Universities had not made such a connection before.

Senior managers in two cases did not have access to key management information, or did not understand what it was telling them (especially financial implications of different programme models, staffing, funding scenarios etc). One Vice-Chancellor reported that on appointment he was unable to find the management information that would have enabled him or his team to make strategic decisions. In other cases, questions were raised about the degree to which governors and leaders were using the correct data to assess risks and make plans.

In one case the need for change was evidently felt throughout the University, but it took the arrival of a new VC with a different vision to push for change. In another, the incoming VC is credited with having sufficient understanding of the HE environment to recognise that the University’s business model would need to change, although some in the University questioned whether the change of direction was the correct one for that institution at that time.

All of the foregoing begs the question, in the absence of individual catalyst or crisis, how can HEIs be sure they are connecting sufficiently with the reality of their situation, and the possibilities that are open to them?
5.3 Resource fluidity

The change of people and skills in senior management teams and governors has already been described as key to successful adaptive change, and the ability of organisations to repopulate their most senior layers of leadership may be a key to adaptability. This points towards organisations needing a keen eye on executive development and succession management.

Other issues of resource fluidity can be broadly divided into those concerning people, and “hard” systems, although the two are clearly inter-related.

Some of the cases involved reduction in staff numbers, and there were stories of this being handled in different ways, with differing outcomes in terms of staff morale and mood. For example, simple removal of headcount by senior managers detached from the business risked the loss of key expertise and organisational knowledge as well as depressing staff morale and motivation. This was contrasted with a more collaborative approach where staff and trade unions worked together to achieve the desired savings while optimising the outcome for the organisation, for example by agreeing to reduced hours and different organisational structures designed by those closer to the front line. It was notable that the approach adopted varied both within an institution and through the duration of the initiative.

The culture of the institutions was often talked about, particularly about its attitude to change and management in general, and the diversity of cultures even within a single University. There was a feeling in some cases that the senior leaders had not accounted systematically for the cultural barriers and opportunities that existed throughout their organisations.

Some cases reported the benefits of simplifying either organisational structure or processes. For example reducing the number of professional service departments from 24 to 5 removed a substantial management layer and forcibly broke down silo walls. More cross-University understanding and working was cited as an enabler of adaptability, because people in one area understood the implications of change for people in other areas.

Having, or moving towards, consistent administrative processes and information systems was seen as a key enabler of adaptability, and certainly played a significant role in cases where mergers had been involved. However, many institutions have been moving organically towards more consistent (centralised) systems in the interest of business efficiency for some time, and it may be a more pertinent observation that such systems needed to be designed or changed to fit the desired new structure or culture. For example, two case institutions changed their financial budgeting system to support their vision, in one case to allow more just-in-time funding of innovation, and in another case to require Faculties to innovate in the pursuit of the new model in order to secure funding.

In the case of Plymouth, the whole point of the change was to encourage enterprise and innovation, and the University has introduced various schemes and systems that allow staff to take autonomous action within clearly-defined boundaries. Throughout the cases there were narratives of innovation being stifled by risk-averse management cultures and long processes of approval, which militated against effective change. The challenge is to balance consistent and robust systems of risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis with a framework that makes it clear to staff what freedom and limitations they have.
5.4 Interviewees' experience of the change
All interviewees were asked to tell the story from their perspective, which gave useful insights into the range of experience and narratives that are circulating in institutions. These perspectives quite naturally vary from senior leaders to front-line staff, but it is useful to note a few general conclusions.

The views of senior managers and professional staff close to the planning core were free and frank with their views of the successes and challenges of the changes described, but tended to be much more secure about the case for change and the need for action. Staff throughout the Universities often had a clear view that change had been necessary, but were more likely to focus on the experience of people around them than on the institutional journey. Their narratives were more closely identified as what people had been talking about in the coffee bars, which were often the more negative aspects of change.

In the three “stressful” cases, staff report a sense of change fatigue, with the organisation perceived to be at once more ready and skilled for change, but also psychologically weary and needing time to consolidate. In one case there was a view that having achieved so much change in a short time, some staff were addicted to change and perhaps too ready to change when new challenges came along.

It was only possible to interview student representatives in one of the cases (because those present through the major changes have graduated). However, there was widespread acknowledgement that the impact on students was in some cases substantial and had not been thoroughly thought through. The involvement of students in the planning and visioning processes seems to have been minimal, or at least not well-documented, in most cases. As well as the immediate impact on students during their studies, the reputational effect of media reports often produced dips in recruitment that required some work to redress.

6 Commentary

In discussing our findings with colleagues at conferences and in-house seminars, a number of points have been raised that we feel it appropriate to comment on.

All the case institutions visited are post-92 Universities. We cannot say with certainty that pre-1992 institutions have not experienced similar transformation. The merger of the Manchester universities may have made an equivalent case but is rather distant now.

Many universities have been undertaking a degree of reshaping activity, changing Faculty structures and increasing emphasis on, for example, the student experience, marketing or international activity. UCL has been reported to be focusing on its global (rather than UK) brand values, Birkbeck College suffered funding shock because of its largely mature student demographic, and some are forming strategic partnerships, but these appear to be less transformational than our examples. However, at the time of writing there is increasing evidence, as the new fee regime begins, that HEIs are much more openly questioning their own purpose and prospects, and beginning to realign their strategies.

What would be different in a pre-92 university faced with the need or opportunity for transformational change? A key factor would be the nature of the academic contract;
academic posts in the “old” universities are protected by statute, making it very difficult to move academic staff out of the organisation without very generous voluntary severance schemes. Hard-edged performance management is counter cultural and research-intensive Universities have found it problematic to introduce.

Anecdotally, Vice Chancellors and Governing bodies in pre-92 universities are assumed to be more conservative than their post-92 counterparts, but there is little evidence for this, and would it be the case if genuine crisis struck? In the case examples, something prompted senior leaders to connect with the core purpose of their institution, and the space of possibility – “what are we really all about, what can we really achieve in this environment.” Without a burning platform it is harder to put energy into this, but arguably many successful universities are already adapting at a pace appropriate for their context.

There is little doubt that the case institutions have developed skills and attitudes for change among a wide range of their staff. It is arguable that Plymouth has become adaptive or agile by introducing enterprise as a core part of its identity. This is characterised by encouragement to sense and take opportunities, through clearly defined boundaries and freedoms, fast risk assessment and decision making.

7 Recommendations

1. Competence and operation of Governing Bodies and top management teams has never been in starker relief – gathering and understanding data, scenario planning, and especially risk management. The future may be less predictable than it once was, but successful HEIs are likely to have leadership who are well connected to the collective organisational intelligence, and take time to examine options thoroughly and with open minds. They are also likely to have leaders (particularly VCs) who can form and communicate a strategy that is aligned to the core purpose of the institution.

2. Personal commitment required of senior leaders undertaking transformational change is immense, and should be expressed in development programmes and other fora.

3. HEIs aiming for adaptability should develop mechanisms for connecting the collective intelligence, and establishment of structures and cultures that permit information to flow. This starts with breaking down the silos in any way you can, but also having more profound consultation processes with genuine dialogue across the levels. The aim is not merely to hear opinion but to co-construct a strategy, which again requires investment of time and risk that may seem excessive at first.

References


