AdvanceHE

Leading small, new and evolving higher education institutions in turbulent times

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AdvanceHE | Small Development Projects

Acknowledgements

I am grateful both for the funding, and for the supportive approach provided by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (now Advance HE), in enabling me to complete this study.

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1. Abstract

The rapid diversification of UK higher education, turbulance in the system and the erosion of the stability assumptions that could once be relied upon provide a challenging backdrop for leadership of any institution. Within the sector there are a number of small-scale higher education institutions. Some of these are well established but others are relatively young and are having to develop and evolve fast. Leadership of all these institutions at such a time of sector-wide instability provides particular challenges. This study has been undertaken to gain some insight into those challenges, enabling learning points to be taken from the recent experiences of the most senior executives of a number of such institutions in England. This report outlines the study and presents the findings.

2. Introduction

New organisational forms and approaches continue to emerge in higher education (HE), even though trends in institutional isomorphism continue to impact global HE (Cai, 2010), creating a tension between innovation and standardisation (Stensaker and Dahl Norgard, 2001). In 2011 the UK government white paper (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011) called for a more diverse and competitive system. Continued marketisation (Brown with Carasso, 2013) encourages the development of new types of institution. Both new and more established small-scale institutions are present in the English HE system in various forms. Group structures and different approaches to branch campuses (Gaskell, 2012) are also enabling small institution-like entities to be developed within larger group structures (Gaskell and Hayton, 2014) forming new 'micro universities' (Gaskell and Dunn, 2018).

The rapid diversification of the UK higher education system, the changing funding regime, a change in the regulatory system (from the Higher Education Funding Council for England [Hefce] to the Office for Students [OfS]) and a challenging demographic downturn in young adults has led to the removal of the stability assumptions that could once be relied upon. This provides particularly challenging operating conditions for small-scale higher education institutions (HEIs), some of which are relatively young as institutions and need to evolve to establish themselves quickly. Although there is a significant body of literature on leadership and management of universities in general, there is a lack of focus on effective leadership of small-scale HEIs set in a context of unprecedented sector-wide instability.

This report presents the findings of a small study which focuses on the leadership challenges of small-scale, new and evolving HEIs in England in these turbulent times. The study was supported as a Small Development Project by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (now Advance HE) and the initial research work was completed at the end of 2017 (Gaskell, 2017). Further analysis work has enabled some practical learning points to be extracted which will provide useful insight for current leaders and those tasked with supporting the development of the leadership teams. The next section provides an overview of the research methodology employed and a brief summary of the nature of the institutions that were studied. Section 3 presents five key themes that emerged, highlighting some of the supporting evidence. Section 4 suggests some key desirable attributes for senior leaders of this type of institution, developed directly from the evidence base provided by the study. Some brief concluding remarks complete the report.

3. Research Methodology

Following a literature survey of policy changes impacting the UK system, contemporary organisational forms and university leadership, a group of new and evolving small-scale HEIs in England were identified. Externally observable histories, strategies and leadership structures were examined. Five candidate institutions were then selected for more detailed study. Those selected all had fewer than 5,000 students enrolled at the time of the study and had gained university status (and, in one case, university college status) after 2011. The five institutions selected provided diversity in terms of institutional type and organisational form and a small case study was developed for each. A brief summary of each of the institutions follows, presented in no particular order:

- Case A is a small and specialist HEI with a focus on the land-based sector. In addition to higher education, a sizable further education (FE) offer is also included with one group of staff focused on FE and another on HE. The institution was designated as an HEI in the mid 1990s. It was given taught degree awarding powers in 2015 and university college title in 2016. The senior team comprised four executive team members including the vice-chancellor.
- Case B is a campus-based HEI in the private sector offering academic provision in business, social sciences, arts and the humanities. It evolved from a number of separate organisations but has been operating in its current form since 2006, gaining university title in 2013 having gained taught degree awarding powers in the previous year. A significant proportion of its students (approximately 85%) are not UK citizens. The senior team comprised the vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor, three pro vice-chancellors with decanal responsibilities and a chief operating officer.
- Case C has a distinctive Christian ethos and a long history, having been in existence since 1862. It was a teacher training college until 1993, gained its own taught degree awarding powers in 2006 and was granted university title in 2012. Although teacher education continues, the portfolio has now diversified significantly. The organisation was reviewing its team structure but at the time of the study the executive level team comprised the vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor and director of resources.
- Case D is a very new institution, having launched in 2007 by amalgamating the higher education components of a number of further education colleges. It has a wide-ranging academic portfolio and a strong community focus. Taught degree awarding powers were gained in 2015 and full university title granted in 2016. Although it only delivers HE, a strong relationship with local FE providers is maintained and it sits comfortably on the HE/FE divide. There is a small top team of three comprising the vice-chancellor, chief operating officer and deputy vice-chancellor, with a slightly larger augmented executive meeting regularly including pro vice-chancellors and some directors.
- Case E started life in 1966 as a pair of gender-specific teacher training colleges each with a strong Catholic foundation. The two colleges merged to form a single college in 1980 and academic provision started to diversify. Teaching only accounts for approximately 25% of provision today with the wider portfolio spanning the arts, social sciences and health, with further diversification continuing. Taught degree awarding powers were granted in 2009 and university title gained in 2012. There was a small executive-level team in place comprising the vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor, chief operating officer and director of finance/planning.

For each of the five institutions studied the senior executive (vice-chancellor) was engaged in a semi-structured interview. In addition to examining the organisational context, journey to date and forward trajectory, and querying the externally observable data, the interviews also prompted respondents to reflect on their senior team structures at executive level and the next layer down. The vice-chancellors were asked about the key leadership challenges faced and the desirable attributes of effective senior level leaders in their particular context. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and analysed using qualitative analysis techniques (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Saldana 2013). Five main themes emerged. A short case study was developed for each institution to provide further context for the analysis. A summary of the five theme areas follows and a selection of anonymised quotes from the interviewees is included for illustration.

4. Themes

4.1 Planning to be sustainably small

Scale was a key issue for all the institutions and a general theme of planning to remain small emerged. In part this is down to a desire to retain a distinctive character:

"(We have) a five-year strategy looking at modest growth … (and plan to) remain relatively small with a student base we can understand – akin to … liberal arts colleges in the states."

However, there was also a sense of inevitability with institutions scaling back on aspirations for growth that had previously been more ambitious. There were even suggestions of planned contraction in their cost bases to prepare for anticipated financial challenges:

"Cost reduction and … reducing our expectations of growth to only a very small percentage each year will protect us from the worst of the problems that will come."

"We have just taken stock … we have had to reduce our numbers because we had forecasted quite ambitious numbers and they're just not coming through."

A related challenge was that of maintaining sustainability in times where there are limited opportunities to grow income. Some of the challenges articulated were very practical in nature, such as keeping turnover at a level sufficient to support core student facing activities:

"(We're) now in a climate where without sufficient turnover there's a range of services which are not straight forward to provide for students – but (we've) got to support students effectively within a narrow budget."

Several were focusing on the challenge of economic programme delivery at small scale while ensuring quality:

"There's a real challenge about how you deliver current programmes economically and still maintain standards and quality."

Related to sustainability is the ability to plan investment and enable sufficient surplus for investment when turnover is limited:

"(A) particular challenge to us is our size and our cushion … we need to be constantly investing and re-investing, the sector is moving so quickly."

A sense of frustration was clear from some that potential sources of additional funding within the sector may be inaccessible to small institutions who had traditionally been teaching focused:

"We're not going to get that research-intensive money, or HEIF money … there's absolutely nothing on the agenda for my university. Where am I meant to get the investment, new money from?"

All this is set against the backdrop of a need to compete, head to head, with much larger and, in some cases, much more established institutions:

"As a small institution we have to be doing everything that the big guys are doing and if we don't sustainability will become difficult."

4.2 Distinctive mission and cultural clarity

In an increasingly competitive sector, protection of the distinctive nature of these small institutions is considered critical:

"(The) biggest challenge is [avoiding] sinking back into the pack."

This quote relates to the importance of mission clarity and sticking to that even as the organisation evolves and potentially expands. At the same time there is a need to be highly opportunistic and adaptable:

"(There's) no point changing direction every five minutes just because there's a bit of money floating about … keep to basic principles of the kind of organisation you want to be … but (you) must be astonishingly adaptable at seeking opportunity."

"Being absolutely clear about your strategy, moving on, but being able to respond in a flexible way to shifting sands."

There was an indication that sticking to the mission and value set can, in the short term, mean that short-term growth and, potentially, income may need to be sacrificed:

"As a new university it would be foolhardy to go down that route in terms of reputation – but we have lost students because of that and 50 students to us has a massive impact."

Close attention to culture was a recurring theme for these institutions:

"Small institutions have a very different culture to big institutions and you cannot overestimate the impact."

Part of the culture, and the scale, is the accessibility of the senior leadership team, and indeed the most senior executive, to staff and students on a daily basis:

"Any member of staff can see me at 24h notice (if I'm here) to talk about anything they want, and that's also true of any student."

The rapidly evolving nature of the institutions studied meant that leadership and management of culture change was an important consideration. Recent acquisition of university status and a need to gain credibility quickly as a university was often a prime motivator of culture change:

"The challenge for a small institution becoming a university is very much in terms of getting the recognition of being a university."

Change of this kind can be particularly challenging if a large proportion of academic staff have previously been used to a teaching-only focus. However, there were some indications of success in developing a research culture:

"(We've) gone from an institution with very small pockets and beacons of research to one where research is much more embedded in what we do."

Innovative thinking, creativity and a willingness to disrupt the status quo, leading rather than just reacting to change, were highlighted as key desirable traits for senior executives at these institutions. This related to the dynamic cultures being promoted within them:

"(We're) looking for people that are creative, prepared to be innovative, consider very different options …(they) need to have an open mind to … substantial change."

"Making sure that people are being creative, out there at the leading edge, rather than sitting back and doing what they've always done…"

4.3 Overloaded roles, active leadership and flexibility

A dynamic approach to executive team structure and role allocation was a common theme, further emphasising an embedded culture of change:

"*(We're) fairly relaxed about structures … (there's) never been two years when the executive has been the same."*

There was also a strong theme of working hard with the team currently in place:

"(Senior team) structure is partly financially driven and partly around need to restructure around capabilities of some individuals."

"I don't think you necessarily get what you want, you've just got to work with what you've got."

"It's (senior team structure) not by design but by default … you've got to be flexible …"

A particularly strong theme was that of overloading of senior team roles, meaning that single executive team members often take on multiple portfolios that would normally be distributed across a number of individuals in larger organisations. The opportunity for highly specialised individual portfolios is limited in these small and budgetarily constrained senior teams.

"(The) challenge for a small institution is the same group of people have to do everything."

"*As a small institution … we don't have the same leadership structures and management structures that a larger institution has."*

Of particular note was the need for individuals to take on a mix of both internal and outward facing duties, and keep the two in a fine balance:

"We're all trying to be outward facing as well as inward facing but somebody's got to do the day job as well."

"(They need) the ability to be external and internal, to have their loyalty internal but to have a high enough profile to be taken seriously externally."

Along with the rich mix of portfolios and the multiple agendas that need to be kept in sight by individual senior executives, the general issue of professional updating, contemporary practice and policy watching across a wide range of areas is also necessary:

"One of (the) major challenges is keeping up to date."

The tendency to have fewer management layers brings very direct accountability for senior colleagues and also a need for active leadership and management, often incorporating an element of leading by doing:

"Executive level (leaders) have to roll their sleeves up a lot more and get on with things themselves, and it's trying to decide where you draw the line on that."

"I need people that are comfortable in their own skin – who will take responsibility and have accountability rather than being figures in authority and demanding things."

The small scale of the institutions, and shallow management structures, leads to a challenge in covering all areas where expertise is needed. There were suggestions of a potential flexibility-expertise trade off that needed to be kept in balance:

"I don't have the luxury of having experts in each area … (who) get on with their own job."

"I've got some members of staff who are good, but they're not very flexible, and I do need that flexibility in here – which is a challenge as well."

"The biggest thing I want is flexibility … in an institution like this you need flexibility but it's balancing that with the expertise."

4.4 Criticality of high-performing middle leaders and managers

The shallow organisational structures and tight top teams of executives with overloaded roles means there is a need for high-performing middle leaders and managers. There was a very strong message that achieving performance within this layer of the organisation was key to success, but also posed a major challenge:

"The biggest leadership challenge we have is the next layer down."

"(I've been) disappointed with middle management … although they are in roles with a management title they are just not comfortable with exercising that or making decisions …"

The issue of being able to rely on academic managers at this level to manage, once developed and empowered to do so, was highlighted:

"I still think a lot of academics in leadership positions … do not recognise the management responsibilities they have."

4.5 Vulnerability, uncertainty and resilience

The interviews did reveal a sense of vulnerability and anxiety felt by some of the leaders of these institutions:

"You feel quite vulnerable … trying to make friends, trying to make relationships, trying to do this on the back of zero public funding but be aware you exist for public good … that anxiety and vulnerability … keeps me awake at night but you can't afford to let it keep your colleagues awake."

Uncertainty was a common issue and it was noted that this is a sector-wide challenge:

"Probably the biggest leadership challenge … is dealing with uncertainty … you just find yourself as a leader having to say I don't know rather more than you've ever had to do before."

"The other thing affecting everybody is just the instability in the sector."

However, a strong sense of a lack of system level support for these small – and in some cases less established – institutions was articulated by some, despite the rhetoric around a need for more differentiation within the sector:

"They are the challenges that I think Hefce and the government aren't thinking of and it does make you think that we're obviously the ones that are earmarked for closure because we're not being supported."

Moving forwards, the OfS no longer have the same mandate that Hefce once had to support struggling institutions and the long-running market exit rhetoric is now much more of a reality. The challenges faced were well understood by these leaders:

"(You) have to make a patch for yourself against significant hostility … to persuade people you're credible … to try and scrape funding together in an era of no funding at all … to be hugely pragmatic, but principled."

It is common for senior leaders in general to have a sense of loneliness and isolation, and this was in sharp focus for these individuals:

"(It's) useful to have contact with other people in similar situations … actually it's very lonely and you do need somebody that you can confide in, or at least understand … "

The need for senior-level networks is clear. However, several articulated the marked differences in their roles and the roles of vice-chancellors of more traditional and established institutions:

"(Comparing VC roles) they don't feel very much the same in lots of ways."

Despite the clear and immediate challenges, a long term and strategic imperative is still essential, with an important stewardship role evident, steering these institutions through the current turbulence and uncertainty for the long term:

"(You) need to be hugely optimistic inside the organisation, and talk about the future, but deep down you know it's not going to be in your reign for sure and probably not your successors', or the one after that. What you're doing is putting down the foundations of something that will really flower in 20 years' time."

5. Desirable attributes of senior leaders of small, new and evolving HEIs

A set of desirable attributes for senior leaders of small, new and evolving HEIs was developed following analysis of the interviews and development of the themes. A process of refinement focused these down to the following 10 attributes, clustered in five groups. These attributes could form the basis of a person specification for a senior leadership role within such an institution. They are generic by nature but have been derived directly from the research process undertaken. They represent a practical output from the study.

People leadership

+ Highly visible within the organisation, demonstrating openness and accessibility to colleagues and students.
+ Build, mentor and motivate a high performing and forward-looking team to take leadership and management responsibility, make decisions with confidence and face challenges positively.

Flexibility

+ Highly flexible and adaptable team player able to take responsibility for a wide ranging and variable portfolio, demonstrating accountability.
+ Understands when specialist knowledge is required and engages individuals with appropriate expertise from within and outside the organisation to provide robust solutions.

Creative change leadership

+ A learning leader, able to insightfully assess the implications of changes in the external environment and keep up to date with sector developments.
+ Drives innovation, thinking creatively, communicating compelling cases for change and supporting colleagues through change.

Culture and communication

+ Demonstrate mission clarity and strong alignment with the desired institutional culture.
+ A compelling and effective communicator both internally and externally, with highly credible ambassadorial skills.

Character

+ Strong resilience with the ability to deal with uncertainty and sector-wide instability, steering a clear course for colleagues.
+ An active leader with a ‘can do’ approach taking personal responsibility for solutions where necessary.

6. Concluding remarks

The analysis has provided five key themes and enabled some desirable attributes for senior leaders of this type of institution to be derived. Although these attributes appear somewhat generic they need to be interpreted in the context of small scale, new and evolving institutions.

Several participants highlighted structural change that was taking place at the time of the study to help adjust to sector challenges and potential threats. In several cases strategic plans had been scaled back, particularly in relation to growth targets. Clearly many of the current sector challenges such as the reduced part-time market

and the shrinking demographic for traditional undergraduates have resulted in many institutions having to re-think their growth aspirations/assumptions. However, the scale of the smaller institutions and the lack of maturity of those that are still relatively young adds additional vulnerabilities when attempting to weather the storm through to a time when opportunities to grow exist again.

Team structures varied quite considerably, with different combinations of executive and wider senior management team roles. However, a very common theme was that of overloaded roles at the most senior level with the need to lead and manage internally while also building profile externally. High resilience is more critical than ever. Making time to engage with colleagues in similar situations who can empathise, provide support and share coping strategies is also critical.

Development of management capacity (Shattock, 2003) as distinct from leadership capacity (Bolden et al, 2014) was also a challenge that was well cited particularly in relation to the middle leader layer. The relatively flat structures of these institutions necessitate empowerment of middle and junior level managers, along with high performance expectations at those levels.

Although there were some very clear common themes across the organisations studied, no single organisational metaphor was dominant. Relationship to a range of theoretical models was evident (Manning, 2013), with the importance and value of collegiality being clear. There was also resonance with the concept of shared leadership (Bolden et al, 2015).

A key challenge is to find and develop leaders that that are creative, prepared to innovate, consider very different options from the status quo and are open minded with respect to substantial changes in business model and approach (Kezar, 2014). The need to motivate academic innovation and entrepreneurship (Kenney, 2009) and introduce new and sometimes fundamentally different ways of working was commonly cited, along with a need to support colleagues through change (Kezar, 2014), including at governing body level. A strong and explicit awareness of micro politics (Lumby, 2015) is also highly relevant to such small and dynamic organisations.

This project has provided some insight into the leadership challenges of a sub group that feel particular vulnerability in the current policy context. There are a number of established forums and information sources to provide support for senior level leaders, and support leadership development within these institutions. GuildHE, the Management of Small Higher Education Institutions Network (MASHEIN), Advance HE and Independent HE provided productive networks, resources and experience to draw upon. The study makes a small contribution to the sparse literature in this area and provides some insight from recent senior leadership practice which should be valuable to those responsible for development of leadership teams within similar organisations.

In addition to highlighting challenges, the study has also revealed that experience of leadership in small scale, new and dynamic higher education institutions has provided a very practical understanding of resilience, entrepreneurship, agility and the ability to manage rapid change successfully, under tight resource constraints. Hence, as the whole sector faces the contemporary challenges, leaders who have significant experience of senior-level leadership in small and rapidly developing institutions, under tight resource constraints and over an extended period, will have valuable experiential learning to contribute to the sector more widely.

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