

## ACADEMIC RESTRUCTURING

### How the Leadership Foundation can help

**Chris Cobb, Pro Vice-Chancellor at Roehampton University**, reflects on working with the Leadership Foundation on a large scale change management project that has touched every aspect of the University.

Building new structures while the sands around you are shifting is normally ill-advised however, to paraphrase another overused metaphor, it's those more able to adapt that survive. Faced with over complex structures, Roehampton has just concluded an 18 month restructuring project which has left it more agile and efficient and, **with the help of the Leadership Foundation**, has redefined the relationship between the academy and the professional services.

In 2009, following a series of recommendations from internal reviews, the University decided to simplify its hierarchies of management and re-shape its four Schools into a flatter departmental structure aimed at improving communication; making the delivery of services more efficient and improving the student experience through creating smaller communities on a more human scale. A guiding principle was to free up time for improved academic leadership at a subject level.

It was hoped that a department based structure would provide students and staff with a greater sense of identity as part of an intellectual community, based on their subject area. Roehampton is very fortunate in having a great many very talented and committed colleagues in both academic and support roles and it was also hoped that a restructure would provide an opportunity to improve the trust and understanding between the central administration and the academy and, in so doing, become a more agile institution prepared to react to a rapidly changing environment as well as provide career opportunities for staff to reach their professional and personal potential.

Following widespread consultation, a business case was developed to consider different subject groupings, income/resource implications, new job

descriptions and an innovative (and controversial) proposal for professional support: transferring line-management of all support staff from the academic heads of department to a centralised reporting line.

The business plan (in its entirety) was endorsed by the University Senate in summer 2009. An 18 month implementation project then commenced under a PRINCE2 framework managed on a day to day basis by internal project manager, Sarah Hall.

The new proposals for administrative support were aimed at relieving Heads of Department from as much bureaucracy as possible, thus enabling a focus on subject development and scholarship. Administrative Department Officers would continue to be based in departments, supporting students and sitting alongside their respective head of department, but in future they would be managed by Assistant Registrars located in the central Registry. Department Officers would be supported locally by additional assistants as well as by a central hub of support staff to manage back-office processes as well as cover for absence and management of peaks of activity in the departments.

Additionally, a team of roving account managers was proposed to support departments in financial, staffing and research matters. These account managers were to spend a day a week in each of their assigned departments reporting through to a professional services Director e.g. HR Director, Finance Director and Research Director.

The new structure therefore provides critical mass to ensure breadth of expertise, continuity of services and professional career opportunities. It also provides economies of scale through standardisation, process automation and de-duplication of systems and processes. Furthermore, it ensures support is delivered locally in a way which is relevant and specific to each department.

It was clear from the outset that the size of the change envisaged would need to be underpinned by a comprehensive staff development programme. The **Leadership Foundation was an obvious choice** to support the University in this. They have the experience and a deep understanding of the issues and a high reputation amongst University staff. It was the first time the University had embarked a programme of this scale and nature and we were grateful to Tom Irvine in scoping the outline and identifying Alistair Work, an associate at the Leadership Foundation, as lead facilitator.

Alistair worked closely with University colleagues to develop a far ranging programme covering all aspects of the University's work. Influenced by Celia Whitchurch's research on *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Managing Complex Futures*<sup>1</sup>, commissioned by the Leadership Foundation; one of the key principles of the programme was to promote a parity of understanding and esteem between the academic and administrative staff. Consequently, an early decision was that, as far as possible, we would develop both groups of staff as one.

The programme began with an overnight retreat for all new Heads of Department and their respective department officers. They were joined by all members of the University's senior management team and the new assistant registrars. Alistair led discussion with the group exploring common themes such as self-awareness, notions of academic leadership and understanding cultural change. The sessions were partly designed as ice breakers but also to enable a shared understanding and ownership for the changes ahead as well as a common vision for the University.

There then followed a further six development days (spread over a five month period) at the university developing understanding in various areas of the university's business. These sessions were led by senior managers from within the University and covered: **'Financing the University's Success'**; **'The Student Experience'**; **'The Roehampton Experience'**; **'The Estate – Space to Succeed'**; **'Research and Academic Enterprise'**; **'Leading and Managing People'**; and **'Governance Issues'**. These sessions were part explanatory and part developmental, collectively defining the new modus operandi.

These internal sessions were revelatory to many participants as they grew to understand the business of the university more holistically. For example how decisions on partial exam entry had implications on funding and how space utilisation affected resource allocation and research grant applications.

In addition to the joint sessions, the new Heads of Department received **one-on-one coaching** and participated in action learning sets led by the Leadership Foundation. Also, the Department Officers followed a certificated programme in Professional Practice for University Administrators which was funded by JISC and the Work-with-IT project under the auspices of SEDA with the support of the Leadership Foundation.

The development programme was a real success, with satisfaction ratings of excellent and good and comments such as *"The programme was highly informative, serving as an excellent introduction to the developing processes, procedures and ethos of Roehampton"* and *"Excellent forum for encouraging exchange of ideas, provoking thought and drawing together different perspectives."*

The project concluded in summer 2010 and the new structure is now fully operational. Inevitably there have been some local teething issues following the redistribution of resource, but overall the project has been implemented smoothly and successfully. Staff and students have adjusted well to the new departments and feedback has been very positive. Furthermore, since redundancies were kept to a minimum, the project was almost £500k under budget and **will realise circa £350k savings per annum** through the improved efficiencies.

Some of these savings have already been ploughed back into student services such as improved learning and disability support and a new student information centre. Another indirect consequence is a dramatic improvement in the estate through the creation of new department and teaching spaces and an office re-furbishment programme. In the course of one year, buildings in condition categories A&B rose from 53% to 92%.

It is still early days but some areas are already reporting a five fold improvement in turn around times of administrative processes and under the new system 90% of students completed the registration process within 24hrs. Significantly, **communication channels have improved and management information is more accurate** and more timely which should ensure the University is as nimble and prepared as it can be for whatever changes lie ahead.

This article is part of a series on **How the Leadership Foundation can help** with in-house programmes, coaching or consultancy. Visit:

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<sup>1</sup> Online at: [www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html/](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/research.html/)