

ENGAGE 24 Winter 2010-11: Leading Lines by Ewart Wooldridge CBE

Rethinking Strategic Planning for uncertain times

I have just finished working on two programmes – a Leadership Foundation Strategic Xchange ‘organisational raid’ at Sheffield City Council and a module on strategic planning with a senior group of academic leaders at a major UK university. Both experiences were about developing new strategies, and also brought home to me the challenges of strategic planning in a period when the goal posts are moving so rapidly in a very fluid political climate.

Working with a number of senior teams in universities, what comes home to me is that we need to rethink completely the strategic planning process that has grown up over the last 10-15 years. Driven significantly (but not exclusively) by the agendas of the funders and regulators, and a product of more comfortable financial times, the outputs have been long documents with a sound evidence base but seldom read or referred to on a regular basis.

It’s different now. Our ability to plan ahead is seriously constrained by lack of clarity about the detail of funding and government policy. The distinction between strategic plans and operating plans has eroded as they end up covering similar time horizons. And the strategy process moves from one which is Funder focused to one which is market and wider stakeholder driven.

In many ways, the new kind of Strategy is less a route map of how we are to navigate the future (since we do not know the whole map) but more an assessment of an institution’s capacity to be agile and flexible in the face of emergent and unpredictable change. There is likely to be a heavy emphasis on having the right people and organisational culture, a vision that is truly engaging, a capacity to optimise the student experience and innovative stakeholder alliances relationships which deliver new sources of funding and influence.

As David Watson commented in our recent research series on HE Futures¹, Scenario Planning is critical, but most importantly institutions need to understand themselves first – their strengths and weaknesses, and their capacity and agility to handle change.

So, let’s unpack in a little more detail what we mean by this new strategic capability for the new era of higher education, by reflecting on agility, distinctiveness and alignment.

I would break down agility into at least three component parts.

Firstly, there is the capacity and willingness to adopt new business models for universities. A host of possibilities are there to be considered, many already being adopted. These include new forms of federal collaboration between clusters of universities – perhaps the only way of driving real value added out of shared services. There are a range of opportunities in seeking partnerships with private sector players – nationally and internationally. The post-Browne world of course creates the immediate scenario of a new kind of market positioning in relation to the student as purchaser and consumer.

¹ Kubler, J., Sayers, N. (2010) Higher Education Futures: Key Themes and Implications for Leadership and Management. Research and Development Series. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Secondly, there are issues relating to the culture of the institution to embrace new ways of operating and determining how things are done. It comes down to how creative the HE community is prepared to be at redesigning structures and procedures. This is not a mechanistic concept as it first relies on creating the climate of engagement with staff that opens up a willingness to look at new possibilities. Really useful reading in this regard is the report ² 'Engaging for success' written for the Department (BIS) by David Macleod a couple of years ago. He has worked with us very effectively at many sector conferences.

Thirdly, there is the strategic leadership of technology – a cause championed by Lord Dearing throughout his period of passionate engagement with higher education, and now recognised as a key determinant of institutional competitiveness internationally.

Beyond the question of agility is the willingness to have the most honest debate about distinctiveness. Does it have to start from the cherished position of institutional autonomy, or can it be achieved through distinctive clusters and collaborations? I have just completed a major project for the Cathedrals Group of Universities on their distinctive characteristics, and at the heart of for them is clarity of an ethics-based focus on students and staff as individuals to be supported in a caring community. They have discovered distinctiveness both individually and collectively.

And then there is the strategic issue of 'alignment'. We are not looking to universities to be corporate in any pejorative sense of the word – merely able to find a more joined-up capacity to serve the new tough agendas.

All these strategic challenges will put the quality of sector leaders to the test, particularly as the issues of financial sustainability and risk increase. A critical ingredient in this is the idea of 'authentic' leadership espoused in Goffee and Jones' book³ with the provocative title 'Why should anyone be led by you'?

That question is perhaps a good litmus test for modern leaders in HE at a time of such fundamental changes.

Ewart Wooldridge CBE
Chief Executive
Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

12 January 2010

² Macleod, D., Clarke, N. (2009) Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee engagement. BIS

³ Goffee, R., Jones, G. (2006) Why should anyone be led by you? Harvard Business School Press