Research and Management in the University Context

Abstracted from *Managing Successful Universities* [Shattock 2010]

Introduction

Effective institutional management represents an important factor in universities performing better than circumstances might suggest it could.

Success does not occur as a result of a single critical decision but as a result of many relatively small good decisions over a long period.

These decisions reinforce each other because the organizational culture encourages consistency of purpose and each decision is related to a whole range of institutional activities and programmes so that they complement one another and create a positive feedback loop.

The focus is on establishing very broad policy objectives rather than planning at a very detailed level. It tries to stimulate success whenever it finds it: in an individual academic's research, in a new teaching initiative, in an opportunistic idea to create a new viable source of income.

It encourages initiative and discourages control, except at very basic system level.

Successful universities thrive on the achievements of staff and students, not on a set of carefully constructed centrally designed policies.

Successful universities are driven by ambition to be the best, nationally or internationally.

Management Style

The required style of management does not suit strict hierarchical structures and top-down management; it works best where structures are flat, communication is quick and informal, and where academic and administrator, professor and lecturer feel their ideas will be considered on merit and not in relation to rank, status, or location, and where debate is open and robust:

- flat structures
- information decentralization
- acceptance of 'constructive confrontation' where central policies can be challenged from below
- internally generated sense of energy
- organizational flexibility that can manage tensions caused by change
- institutional ambition to be the best

Chapter 1: What are the Characteristics of a Successful University?

Management needs to be able to define success and ensure performance is geared to achieving it.

Universities are multi-faceted, multi-product organizations which increasingly are taking on additional roles, particularly in relation to the knowledge economy and social inclusion, although their core business remains teaching and research.

Ways of defining success are elusive.

Mission statements have become more marketing instruments than realistic statements of strategic purpose.

Despite the fact that universities are traditionally research and teaching institutions, university success is often equated with research reputation alone.

Due to increased importance of marketing, universities have become engaged in "an arms race" for prestige [Dill and Soo 2005] or a "reputation race" [Rhoades 1990] that is primarily based on research.

Research rankings represent a huge reputation factor and are by a very long way the most sought after and respected ranking in the academic community.

An organizational culture that persuades 'ordinary people to behave in extraordinary ways' is crucial.

Contextual factors that contribute to success
The age of the university is often associated with prestige: only 8% of Europe's most research intensive universities were founded in the post-war period.

The 'halo-effect' of older institutions enables them to attract the best staff and the best students which in turn creates a self-reinforcing success.

These institutions have established over time a working environment, certain ways of doing things, an operational structure, and an organizational culture which has stood the test of time and which does not need to be reinvented to cope with sharp changes in the external environment.

Leading centres of the professions, growing centres of enconomic activity, larger cities rather than small towns, rich communities, areas with effective and committed political leadership and areas of great natural beauty and good climate: all are particularly likely to see the development of outstanding research universities.

A bad location in an unfashionable town distant both from industry and from centres of social life, or in a town with a reputation for ugliness or lack of amenities, can be a disincentive to attracting good staff or students.

Summary of qualities characteristic of success:

- Strong organizational culture

- Strongly competitive approach, internally and externally

- Adaptability to the environment without changing fundamental identity

- Willingness to take bold decisions

- Conservative approach to finance

- Open collegial approach to decision making which does not back away from 'constructive confrontation'

Self-perpetuation
'A good scientist is usually attracted by centres and universities of excellence where he or she finds the human and physical capital that permits development of high level research. This improves both the quality of the individual and the general quality of the institution and consequently attracts new research funds and capable researchers. In this situation there are two inter-related circles.' [Gueno 1998].

The most successful universities are the most successful separately in research-related and in teaching-related activities: excellence in both goes hand in hand.

High quality research, once established, tends to reinforce itself: research performance has a strong tendency to be both self-sustaining and self-reinforcing.

Success is dependent on creating a momentum in which success reinforces success, rather than being dependent on isolated actions or sharp changes of direction that can overnight alter an institution's trajectory.

Institutional management represents an integral and often determining factor in achieving institutional success.

Chapter 2: Strategic management in universities

Definition of strategic management:
"The art and science of formulating, implementing and evaluating cross functional decisions that enable an organization to fulfill its objectives" [David 1996].

Devolution
"Top management's job is less to spot and solve problems than to create an organization that can spot and solve its own problems" [Hayes 1985].

Strategic management is as important in operating units as it is in the central core: individuals need to feel a sense of ownership.

Empowerment
"The goal of management is first to amplify and then aggregate human effort – to get more out of individuals than one might expect by providing them with the appropriate tools, incentives and working conditions, and to then compound those efforts in ways that allow human being to achieve together what they cannot achieve individually" [Hamel 2007].

Predisposition of Academics
Academics tend to be more loyal to their discipline (and their department) than to their institution but, on the other hand, the institution and its success or failure and the way it is managed can have a critical impact on departmental success or failure.

The Roots of Success: Broad Objectives vs. Detailed Planning
Sustained success lies much less in dramatic new initiatives and much more in harmonizing the different components of university management to be mutually reinforcing. Strategic management is therefore an integrating mechanism which pulls policies and processes together to achieve the best institutional outcomes.

Establishment of broad objectives more effective than detailed planning because:

- Environmental turbulence (e.g. changing is funding conditions, new research initiatives, volatility of student market, perceptions of potential students).

- Fluctuations in the fortunes of operating units (e.g. arrival or departure of key staff, new research funding).

- The need to maintain infrastructure (a decline in academic infrastructure adversely affects staff morale, efficiency, and public perception; no external donor wants to give money to campuses which are poorly maintained, littered, or covered in graffiti).

- The criticality of day-to-day decision making (cumulative, every-day decisions can impact the development of an institution more than any master plan … these create 'emergent strategies' [Mintzberg 1994]).

This demands a more flexible and occasionally opportunistic approach.

 "When you are lost on a highway, a roadmap is very useful; but when you are lost in a swamp whose topography is constantly changing, a roadmap is of little help. A simple compass – which indicates the general direction to be taken and allows you to use your own ingenuity in overcoming various difficulties – is much more valuable" [Hayes 1985].

Most university strategic planning documents are very like roadmaps – too prescriptive and too detailed to be useful when the external environment is so changeable … and they often take on a life of their own so that people cling to the plan, regardless of how successful or relevant it turns out to be.

The best strategic plans are evolutionary rather than directive; strategic management is messy and disorderly but having an evolving strategy is better than focusing on a "stable fantasy" [Mintzberg and Walters 1985].

Detailed plans for academic development over a three to five year timescale can have a negative impact if they become, as they easily can, a straitjacket which inhibits incremental or opportunistic change.

It is much more important that a university should establish some broad objectives as long term but realistic goals to be achieved over an unspecified timescale (cf. the contrast with SMART goals). These objectives should primarily be directional in nature and should be designed to give academic departments, faculties, deans, and adminstrators a clear direction regarding medium term priorities for institutional development.

Detailed planning becomes a constraint rather than a stimulus to achievement and can close off innovation.

Framework for Strategic Management
In establishing these broad objectives, it is essential to provide a framework within which a wide variety of individual innovative ideas can be considered, some arising spontaneously bottom-up in the academic staff at a departmental level, some emerging from the centre, some out of dialogues between the centre and the departments.

These objectives should evolve out of discussion over months if not years as the broad set of directions in which the institution should be moving, not simply constructed after a debate and adoption as part of a formal process extending over one or two meetings of a committee or a chance discussion at an 'away day'.

Just three or four objectives are needed.

They should represent the settled conclusions of an institution that knows where it is going but that is willing to give itself the latitude to adopt various different routes to meet its objectives depending on the options that present themselves, year to year.

Strategic Direction vs. detailed planning
"Ultimately the term 'strategic planning' has proved to be an oxymoron" [Mintzberg 1994].

Note the contrast with project management.

"An institutional steering mechanism is necessary to channel opportunism generated by forward momentum, but a control mechanism will disincetivize initiative"

Institutional Agility
Strategic management must allow the university to be agile: willing and able to act quickly, to be opportunistic, to take risks, to win a competitive edge.

This requires university management to be able to:

- Quickly assemble the people with the skills required to assess a situation or opportunity

- Put in place a process of consultation and decision making that does not exclude the academic community and which is consistent with accepted (e.g. statutory or established) decision-making.

The decision-making processes must recognize the importance of taking a decision on the basis of judgment and instinct without quite all the supporting data being available.

The Roots of Success lie in the Departments
"Successful universities … recognize that ultimately institutional success is built in the modern era on an accumulation of one-off individual academic successes each of which adds to the capacity of the institution to achieve further success within a broad framework of agreed objectives rather than, as in the past, on formal planning and on lengthy deliberative processes".

Institutional Culture
"Culture eats strategy for breakfast" (Peter Drucker(.

Charismatic leadership is not a prerequisite for effective management.

"Individualized leadership is less critical to success than an organizational culture that encourages a sense of common purpose, welcomes the need for rigorous and disinterested debate and accepts that decisions have to be taken and implemented within an appropriate timescale. The central steering core

may initiate policy but its more important task is to coordinate and react to proposals that are fed to it from below"

"The essential academic vitality of a university must lie in its academic departments; the role of the central steering core is to sustain that vitality, support their ambitions within a framework of strategic objectives and manage the processes that bring their ambition to fruition."

Positive feedback loops: "Good universities encourage a climate of innovation and development, where new ideas are supported and initiative is rewarded. Success has a cumulative effect and drives up performance across the institution".

"Strategic management must be driven by institutional ambition, by the competitive urge and by the recognition that in a competitive climate there must be losers as well as winners".

"Successful strategic management is highly dependent on a supportive institutional culture which is sustained not by glossy newsletters or electronic interventions in the form of state of play messages from the head of the institution but by shared understandings about what the institution is about and what its ambitions are".

Unsuccessful universities are characterized by hierarchical and conservative decision making processes, a reluctance to recognize individual talent and an unwillingness to compete.

"The gap will widen between universities where good strategic management is firmly embedded and those where it is not: those that spend too much of their effort on detailed forward planning and insufficient on responding to the new environment and those where previous failure have led to an over cautious approach to decision taking."

The importance of research
Research success at a departmental and an institutional level is critical because, in research active universities, student recruitment generally follows research reputation.

Chapter 4: The academic context: organization, collegiality, and leadership

Leadership

"It's about listening, then deciding and then leading forward, and not about managerial direction and confrontation" [Midgley and MacLeod 2003].

"It may be that if an inspirational leader (not necessarily in a formal management role) embodies shared values they can act as a focal point for collective endeavour and facilitate the engagement of others in the leadership process" [Bolden et al. 2008].

"Effective university leadership requires a combination of both individual and collective leadership … [but] … despite overwhelming support for a collective leadership approach [staff express a need for] inspirational or visionary individuals, particularly in times of change or transitions" [Bolden et al. 2008].

Leadership must be dispersed around a university: leadership at the centre can achieve nothing without leadership in the departments, research groups, and academic support staff.

On occasion, this will lead to confrontation; this is not to be avoided and is good for the institution.

The Bain Principles [Bain 2003]

- Lead more, manage less
- Appoint the best people [to manage]
- Delegate extensively
- Focus your efforts [on a limited number of activities]
- Be visible
- Don't procrastinate
- Don't expect gratitude
- Don't hold grudges
- Don't believe your own rhetoric
- Don't stay too long

(G. S. Bain: ex-Vice Chancellor, Queen's University Belfast).

Ramsden's principles for leadership at the level of Dean or Department [Ramsden 2000]:

- Leadership is a dynamic process: having clear goals but giving people the independence to pursue them

- Leadership is focused on outcomes: to create conditions that enable high quality research and teaching

- Leadership is relational: it occurs in situations and it must be colleagues who determine whether you are a leader

- Leaders must also be learners about how to do the job

- Academic leadership must also be transformative: it is about 'helping ordinary people to do extraordinary things', helping academics to embrace change, and as a leader, 'transforming one's own performance'.

"In successful universities … academic and other staff are more willing to adjust their contributions to institutional goals provided they have been convinced by them. Harnessing these contributions is the true task of leadership."

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