

Hybrid Higher Highlights

Hybrid working and leadership in higher education

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This pamphlet presents a short digest of ideas and principles from the full Hybrid Higher leadership intelligence report. The Hybrid Higher project was run by Advance HE as a collaborative enquiry with colleagues from across the higher education sector during June 2021.

A full list of acknowledgements for the project can be found in the main report.

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Introduction

Each twist in the journey through the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown up new challenges. Some of these have been substantial traumas, things to be suffered, lived through or overcome, while others have been disruptors that have significantly changed the way we do things. The thing about disruptors, though, is that they can sometimes point toward innovations that may be a change for the better. This is exemplified in the strong potential suggested by a hybrid operating model, which follows months of enforced working from home and furlough. Employers across all sectors are looking closely at how they can make hybrid work to meet both staff expectations and business needs.

Alongside other sectors, higher education (HE) faces important choices regarding the potential offered by a hybrid operating model. The rapid pivot to online learning and teaching in response to Covid-19, with many staff working from home, was something that no one saw coming, but we did it. Yes, we did it. And now, what next? Does a more hybrid working world beckon as we begin to pivot back?

To support the HE sector to engage with the potential and the uncertainty brought about by the prospect of large-scale hybrid working, in June 2021 Advance HE launched a rapid, generative project to explore the hybrid question. The Hybrid Higher initiative brought together senior colleagues from across the sector with responsibility for planning future work and operational models. Through facilitated discussion in two webinar workshops colleagues worked to develop a picture of the challenges and opportunities involved in hybrid working, to share insights and to consider how to achieve a purposeful hybrid balance between virtual engagement and in-person collaboration.

The workshops began with a carousel of speakers, followed by three parallel sessions of facilitated group discussion. The three focus areas for discussion were:

- + operational effectiveness
- + leadership, team cohesion and motivation
- + fairness and inclusion.

These are the three section headings in this pamphlet.

The [full Hybrid Higher Leadership Intelligence Report](#), available to all Advance HE member institutions, presents a detailed account of the observations, challenges and possible solutions generated through the collaborative conversations. Our thanks to everyone involved for sharing their thinking so openly and inclusively.

This Highlights pamphlet essentially extracts from the main report and presents as a summary the 'key principles and principle-based questions' that were identified.

Achieving a hybrid operating model in HE, one that meets diverse needs and expectations at the same time as safeguarding the organisation by enhancing both what we do and how we do it, will involve the efforts and incredible ingenuity of colleagues at every level as we move not towards a 'new' normal but the 'next' normal, reflecting the ongoing fluidity of the world we are currently working in. We hope this publication will be an important resource to support you in achieving this.

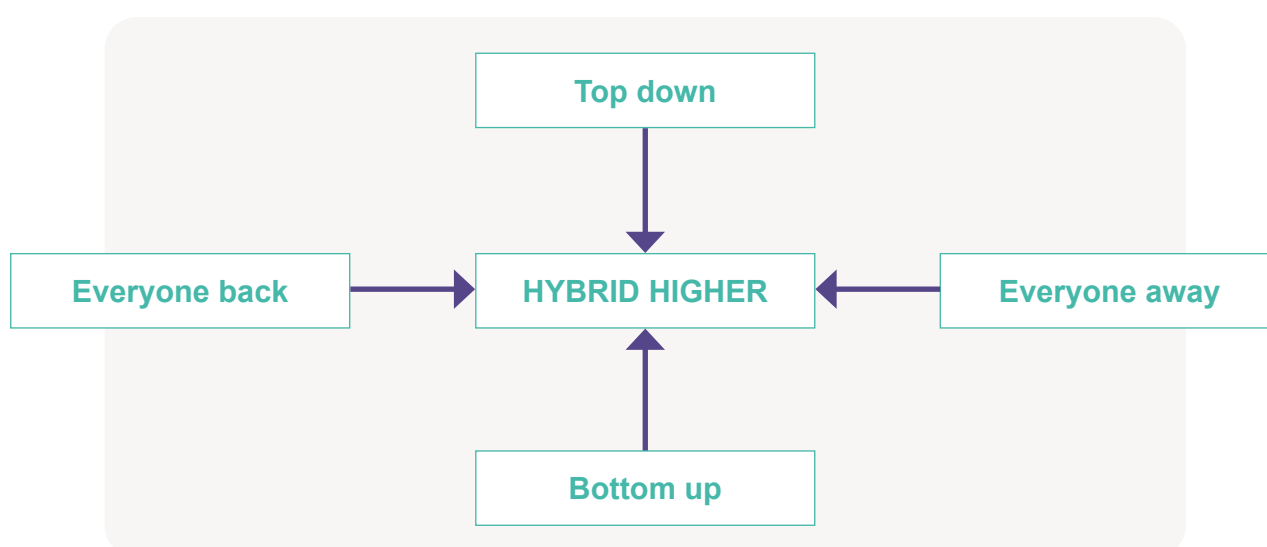
Operational effectiveness

Ensuring an operating model that maintains or enhances the institution's core capabilities around research, education, enterprise, and key stakeholder engagement.

“Organisations have become more flexible about where and when employees work. Now they need to be more intentional about their choices and trade-offs.”

(Grattan, 2020¹)

Figure 1: Pathways to operational effectiveness.



This figure illustrates the pathways to operational effectiveness that came through in the Hybrid Higher conversations. One dimension is about the balance between top-down decision-making and more organic, bottom-up influence. The other dimension is really about the starting point for the institution – either bringing everyone back to campus and then beginning discussions about flexibility, or colleagues remaining where they are (eg working from home), if they are content to be there, and then negotiating the on-campus/in-office needs. Both scales present a spectrum of options rather than four fixed alternatives.

¹ Grattan, L (2020). 'Four Principles to Ensure Hybrid Work is Productive Work'. MIT Sloan Management Review (November 2020). Available at: sloanreview.mit.edu/article/four-principles-to-ensure-hybrid-work-is-productive-work/ [accessed 29 June 2021].

The following key principles and principle-based questions relating to operational effectiveness emerged from the discussions and interactions in this Hybrid Higher collaborative enquiry:

- + Make organisational vision and purpose your starting point for decision making. *If we don't know where we're going, any path will do...*
- + Ensure the institution remains effective, in every sense, both for today and tomorrow.
- + Don't turn your back on enlightenment. It could be said that the enforced experiment with virtual engagement has been an age of digital enlightenment, and not just for higher education.
- + The journey from panic pedagogy to sophisticated hybrid education continues to be one of discovery, trial and error, and innovation.
- + Treat hybrid higher as an agile project – deliver incrementally instead of all at once.
- + Beware of making key institutional strategic decisions without allowing for reflection and iteration.
- + The hybrid higher challenge should be seen as an opportunity for organisational enhancement. Better, faster, smarter, while at the same time fostering a more compassionate and inclusive culture.
- + To what extent are you listening to all of your stakeholders in a balanced way?
- + In what ways and to what degree can you regard quality as a constant?
- + What is most valued in your current provision and how can you ensure it is preserved?
- + Constrained time and constrained place = traditional 9am-5pm in an office; there are advantages to consider (alongside trade-offs) of anywhere and anytime.
- + Radical reinvention:
 - over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic we were forced to deconstruct what we did, to deliver the same things but in a different manner. We had to reconsider everything and go back to the basic principles of what the university is for. But some of the changes were coming anyway, for instance universities are now taking a different approach to knowledge construction and dissemination which doesn't necessarily fit well with traditional operating models. Should we seize this opportunity for radical reinvention?
- + The pandemic world continues to be very uncertain and so an agile mindset will help both individual and institution evolve.
- + The 'student as customer' is a hard concept in HE, but in a Covid-19 world there is, perhaps, a greater emphasis on providing customer service and satisfaction (value for money).
- + Do not rule out the possibility of introducing some completely new key performance indicators (KPIs).
- + The composition of the student population is evolving and the institution's operating model may need to shift in line with changing expectations.

- + To safeguard staff engagement, take people with you through consultation and show that you are listening at every turn.
- + What does 'vibrant campus' mean to you? What 'vibrant' means in one institutional context may be very different to what it means in another.
- + The need for intention is urgent! Balancing the need to take deliberate and well-planned steps towards more flexible ways of working that safeguard the institution while "... not losing the long-term aim of creating a highly collaborative, dynamic space allowing informal movement" (Gratton, 2020).
- + Effectiveness will require differentiation – for example, those functions that have choice about where to work and those that don't; those that have huge teams and those that don't.
- + These hybrid shifts are radical! The impact on different teams and individuals needs close consideration, with no assumptions of uniformity.
- + Balance the pace of innovation with the structures required to allow people to engage with change.
- + Never stop asking, what are the opportunities and *what are the risks?*
- + Never stop asking, how inclusive are we being in our thinking and approach?
- + Some previously taken-for-granted 'occupational requirements' will now be open to challenge as a result of what individuals have achieved working from home during the last 12/18 months.
- + Once formal hybrid working decisions become fixed they may be very difficult to reverse.
- + Flexible thinking will be needed to accommodate flexible needs.
- + Be a learning organisation – use trials, pilots and iterative planning to develop the new hybrid model as a community: trial – test – reflect.
- + Develop digital leadership skills at all levels.
- + To safeguard the institution we need to reflect on the behaviours being modelled through leadership, including respecting diversity and inclusion.
- + Alongside all of this are the hopes and expectations of students as the sector approaches the next academic year/semester. *Vibrant, lively, exciting, sociable, welcoming and 'high value'* may all be words in the collective student mind. If so, how can you facilitate and safeguard this in a safe way?
- + Remember, as much as anything else this is a governance challenge.
- + Trial – test – reflect.

Leadership, team cohesion and motivation

The challenge of leading with purpose, focus and engagement when team members have mixed modes of participation, and achieving both individual and collective commitment.

The two hybrid leadership modes:

Virtual coordination mode – “This means establishing goals, monitoring progress, driving information sharing, and sustaining connections among colleagues working remotely.”

Face-to-face collaboration mode – “When... teams periodically come together to engage in true collaboration... fostering deep learning, innovation, acculturation, and dedication.”

(Hooijberg and Watkins, 2021²)

The following key principles relating to leadership, team cohesion and motivation emerged from the discussions and interactions in this Hybrid Higher collaborative enquiry.

- + Good leadership is good leadership. The pandemic experience and the challenges of virtual engagement have made the need for effective, engaging leadership clearer than ever, and exposed leadership development needs at all levels.
- + An evolving world of work calls for agile leaders with a balanced approach.
- + The journey from transactional responses (the crisis) to a transformational future is a journey of trust.
- + Hybrid teams will thrive if there is a healthy combination of group interdependence and self-leadership.
- + Processes provide structure, principles provide a guiding light.
- + The secret to engagement is connecting people with purpose (and purpose with people).
- + Your vision as an institution, the experience you want to create and offer, should be your fundamental basis for decision-making.

² Hooijberg, R and Watkins, M (2021). *'The future of team leadership Is multimodal'*. MIT Sloan Management Review (February 2021). Available at: sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-future-of-team-leadership-is-multimodal/ [accessed 23 June 2021].

- + Treat the move to hybrid working as a change initiative and use your very best change leadership skills.
- + This is an emergent change challenge, it will be a journey of many steps (so at this stage maybe treat everything as a pilot).
- + Each step in the journey is an opportunity for engagement, so keep the conversations going with all staff and stakeholders.
- + Set out your core assumptions and guiding principles, and empower others to have discussions and explore options on this basis.
- + Aim to combine top-down direction with bottom-up inspiration.
- + Like an ecosystem, structure, strategy and culture will all shift together. So, what will the move to hybrid working mean for your organisational culture?
- + Hybrid leadership involves a mindset shift:
 - from hours to outputs
 - from informing to involving
 - from linear to lateral management (working across the team rather than through the team)
 - from a narrow to a broad range of styles
 - from 'out of sight, out of mind' to 'the less I see, the more I care'
 - from unconscious bias to deeper awareness
 - from transactional to relational trust
 - from diversity on the surface to inclusion at the heart.
- + The hybrid leadership relationship calls for deliberate and intentional inclusion.
- + Always question whether the changes that are emerging or being considered are sustainable (for individuals and the institution).
- + Be careful of equating consistency with fairness – for hybrid working and leadership a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to work (rigid policies could hamper progress).
- + Virtual leadership with those you already know is one thing, inducting and developing a relationship with new team members is a different level of challenge.
- + The virtual leader's role is to create space for both formal and unplanned team interactions – such spaces need to be physically and psychologically safe.
- + Leadership development is more important than ever for team and organisational success, including fairness, inclusion and wellbeing.
- + Ensure leadership development activities are a strong combination of emotional intelligence, exploring values and well-tailored, context specific practical skills.
- + Enable experience sharing for leaders through short support sessions and action learning.
- + Never argue for your leadership limitations on the basis of technology.

Fairness and inclusion

Designing and facilitating fair and flexible working practices that suit all locations and underpin a culture of inclusion where no groups or individuals are disadvantaged.

Included as a provocation:

“... if the office reopens and executives are first in the office, and even if they say you have a choice whether or not to come in, it sends a very powerful signal that the choice you have now is between your family or your career. You can go to your office and be seen or you can choose your family and go remote.”

“If you have two playing fields to administer, they are inequitable by design.”

(Darren Murph, Head of Remote at GitLab; cited in Dickey, 2021³)

The following key principles relating to fairness and inclusion emerged from the discussions and interactions in this Hybrid Higher collaborative enquiry.

- + Most importantly, ensure that the prominence of the hybrid working challenge does not cause issues of fairness, inclusion and equity to be overlooked.
- + Balancing virtual engagement and in-person collaboration in a fair way will often mean balancing the needs of the team with the needs of individuals.
- + What does a vibrant, attractive and fit-for-purpose campus mean in your context?
- + Historically, structures and systems have been developed by and for the majority, or from the standpoint of privileged groups. Hybrid working models may be an opportunity to address deep-rooted inequalities.
- + Fairness is about the principles upon which we make decisions.
- + Beware of a heavy-handed approach to fairness. Treating everybody the same no matter what is not a strategy for inclusion.

3 Dickey, M R (2021) ‘*Proximity bias is real. Returning to the office could make it worse*’. Protocol (23 June 2021). Available at: www-protocol-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.protocol.com/amp/proximity-bias-hybrid-work-2653479216 [accessed 28 June 2021].

- + Whose definition of fairness are you using?
- + Perceptions as well as realities need to be recognised and addressed to achieve inclusion. Perception is reality!
- + Aim to empower the voice of marginalised groups, and then listen to what they have to say (even if the stories and the messages are hard to listen to).
- + When it comes to listening, should students be the people we listen to first?
- + Create open, trustful and safe environments for staff to share their desires and concerns.
- + All systems can be gamed, so don't lose sight of simple issues like fairly spreading workloads.
- + Capitalise on the best parts of the pandemic experience, including where changes and adjustments have supported individual needs.
- + One size will not fit all, so allow for differentiated outcomes.
- + Don't leave flexibility to chance – new job descriptions need to be carefully defined.
- + Consider who communicates with whom, the issue of filtering and perceptions of fairness when engaging a diverse community of colleagues.
- + Communication, communication, communication (but make sure staff are not overwhelmed).
- + Partner with unions and staff representative groups.
- + Think principles, think systems, think practice and *think culture*.
- + Could hybrid working cause the academic and professional staff divide to increase?
- + What does it mean for a manager to be 'available' to their team; what does it mean for a tutor to be 'available' to their students?
- + Beware *proximity bias*: the idea that employees with close physical proximity to their team and leaders are better workers and more reliable.
- + The essence of an agile mindset is to notice, consider and correct unintended consequences as they arise.
- + Onboarding new staff colleagues into a hybrid working model is likely to become increasingly challenging and could lead to disengagement and marginalisation.
- + People do not always have the right devices, the right environment or the right skills around online connectivity.
- + Maintain informal interactions by finding ways to *do deliberately some of the things that used to happen by chance*.
- + Make engagement purposeful. The answer to the question '*why am I here?*' should be clear, but that answer may have social, relational and team dimensions.

- + Provide new Covid-19 guidelines and help staff get used to campus working again to reduce anxiety.
- + It may be dangerous to interpret anxiety about returning to work as resistance.
- + Offer phased returns to campus based on people's individual needs and circumstances.
- + Treat everything you do initially as a pilot.
- + Keep any policies you develop iterative and open to review.
- + Always ask the question, which voices informed this policy?
- + Use staff surveys for feedback, but don't make them the only form of feedback.
- + Listen to the informal, shadow side of the organisation, not just the set forums.
- + ***Develop your managers and leaders like never before!***

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