

Transformational Change in the Higher Education Sector

An inquiry into leadership practice

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Executive summary

There is enormous change going on in the higher education sector in response to increased national and global competition and the shifting policy environment over the last 20 years. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are building and developing: they build large-scale infrastructural projects and they develop their organisational practices, including trying to change staff attitudes and behaviour. This report is an attempt to take stock of what these changes have meant for leaders in six HEIs who are trying to 'transform' their institutions by asking them what it has been like for them, what they have found themselves doing as leaders and how they have subsequently come to think about what is important in leading change.

The idea of transformational change is a contested one, in the sense that there is no agreement about what it actually means and how and when we know that something is transformed for the good. The banking collapse of 2008 was also a form of transformational change. Nonetheless there can be no doubt that the changes are taking place in HEIs have created enormous pressures on leadership teams in universities. This is particularly the case if leaders assume that they can control change and accurately predict the outcome. This report does not make such assumptions but draws on a complexity perspective, arguing that change arises from the interweaving of everyone's intentions, which no one, no matter how powerful, can control. In doing so we have drawn on 20 years of theory on development in complexity and organisational change at the University of Hertfordshire. For this project we have taken a particular interest in how leaders reflect on the change processes they have been caught up in, paying particular attention to leadership activities, power relations and politics, and contested valuations of the good.

The case studies we discussed with leaders in Cardiff University, Canterbury Christchurch University, Coventry University, Glasgow Caledonian University, Ulster University and University of Central Lancashire include both relatively small, contained projects and institution-wide initiatives. They range from closing campuses and constructing buildings through to more inchoate 'culture change' agendas. The research is based on more than

40 interviews producing more than 500 pages of transcript. Not surprisingly, the attempt to generalise from these can sometimes cover over differences within and between institutions. Respondents were generous with their time and very open with their insights and observations. But we also only visited each institution for a day and realise that to a degree, and according to the African proverb, until lions have their historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter.

Respondents were unanimous in understanding that new times require new measures, but were mixed in the degree to which they thought the changes were beneficial to the sector. Many expressed a profound sense of anxiety arising from increased competition and were sometimes caught on the horns of a dilemma of, on the one hand, not keeping up or, on the other, radically altering universities to their detriment. A number of respondents noted how being a leader required them to be able to tolerate contradictions such as these.

The reality of having led complex change helped respondents understand the limitations of the narrative of leader as a heroic and charismatic individual. Instead, the key skills of leaders are understood as storytellers in chief, sense-makers, obstacle-clearers and perspective-takers. They develop an ability to dwell for longer in uncertainty than those they are leading. They acquire judgment about whether to reveal this uncertainty or not: to do so may be relieving, or it may cause further anxiety for those they lead.

In order to undertake complex change projects top teams have professionalised, both in terms of their own management training and also in terms of the methods they deployed to keep on top of multiple change projects. Plans worked best, respondents agreed, if they were clear, prioritised and logical but also open to revision and responsive to circumstances. One respondent described this as the 'sweet spot' between rigour and spontaneity. Informal off-agenda communication is just as important as larger-scale town hall meetings because they allow access to leaders where less formal, improvisational communication can take place.

Most respondents argued that change projects are not just about visions, plans and metrics, but are complex social processes entailing the more or less open exercise and negotiation of power and politics. The development of relationships, allowing for new forms of identity to emerge through mutual recognition, are at the heart of successful change projects. One respondent warned: *“If they don’t recognise themselves, they might comply, they might obey, but it’s not leadership: it’s coercion, and that’s something different.”* Perhaps the most important relationships are those at the top table, which have often been affected by churn in personnel. The ability to produce generative relationships here are critical for developing skill in working on relationships elsewhere.

Respondents were divided about what they thought culture means, and the degree to which it is possible to change organisational culture deliberately. All agreed that the way we behave towards each other, act and speak are important, but this may say nothing about what people are thinking. Longer-term traditions of the academy and in the academy may persist in spite of the grandest change project.

Many respondents were wary of using the term ‘transformational change’ with their change-weary staff, particularly if positive outcomes cannot always be guaranteed. Most were able to draw on a more nuanced positivity. The term transformation may also create a burden of expectation on senior managers to ‘do something’, which they sometimes found themselves resisting in favour of listening, watching and waiting, or admitting that they might be wrong.

In conclusion, this report has not generated a list of best-practice guidelines for what leaders should do when they are embarking on big change projects. Instead it has taken seriously the experience of leaders caught up in processes of change and has asked them for their observations about what it has been like to lead. They have described needing a number of qualities and abilities which are not generally discussed in the leadership literature. These include the ability to live with contradiction and doubt, and to bear uncertainty longer than those they are leading. A complementary skill is the practical judgment to know when to express this doubt to others.

Practical judgment is required more generally in the negotiation of power relationships, and in the ability to ‘read’ a group, which requires taking a view of when to press and when to cede. If conflict is always immanent in groups undertaking change, then leaders need an enhanced ability to bear the sometimes negative expression of emotion, and address loss and disappointment as well as excitement and anticipation. Leaders described how they developed a degree of nuance with the more orthodox understanding of change as always being positive with their sometimes change-weary staff, although they also understood themselves as enablers, and actors bringing staff into a different relation with leaders, and with themselves. The act of leadership involves the renegotiation of identity, who we are and what we think we are doing together.

These insights suggest further research is needed into the day-to-day practice of leadership, which focuses on the quotidian stresses and strains of getting things done with others, rather than on the rather grandiose and idealised discourse of leadership with which we have become familiar.

Author biographies

Professor Chris Mowles is director of the Doctor of Management (DMan) programme at Hertfordshire Business School and convenor for the research theme Managing Complex Change. Chris has written a number of books and articles on complexity and organisational change, and has taught at Copenhagen Business School, the Open University in the Netherlands and Aalborg University. He is an associate member of the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) and teaches on the IGA Foundation course in Oxford.

Dr Jana Filosof is a principal lecturer and a director of the Social Enterprise Unit at Hertfordshire Business School. Her research interests include ethics in practice, complexity and reflexivity. She has undertaken research and consultancy projects within the charity sector. During her teaching career she has been involved in developing and delivering several leadership programmes for the private, public and the third sectors. Prior to entering academia, Jana worked in media and advertising.

Dr Dawn James is an early career researcher with a particular interest in entrepreneurship and the emergence of novelty or new knowledge, the evolution of entrepreneurial institutions and the emergence of entrepreneurial leadership in complex and volatile environments. Her PhD dissertation was entitled: *Marketising Post-1992 Universities in the Knowledge Economy: A Value Chain Approach*.

Dr Rachelle Andrews is director of the Centre for Executive Leadership at University of Hertfordshire, with responsibility for coordinating the portfolio of executive programmes at Hertfordshire Business School. With more than 12 years' teaching in higher education, she has experience of programme development and leadership and is currently leader of the MSc Business and Organisational Strategy. Recently she has taken a lead in the development of the new Level 7 Senior Leader Degree Apprenticeship. Prior to working in higher education she has extensive experience of leadership in small and medium-sized businesses, working as managing director for an export services company and then working for eight years in advising and consulting. Her PhD research explored the provision of business support for SMEs in the context of policy and government funding.

Dr Kevin Flinn is head of leadership and organisational development at the University of Hertfordshire, a member of faculty on the Hertfordshire Business School MBA Programme, an associate with Advance HE and an associate member of the Institute of Group Analysis. For over two decades, Kevin has specialised in developing the effectiveness of individuals and teams across private, charitable, and public sector organisations in the UK and overseas. As a graduate of the Doctorate in Management (DMan) programme and a member of the Managing Complex Change research theme at Hertfordshire Business School. Kevin brings a very different perspective to leadership and organisational development than that found in the mainstream.

Dr Phil Mason is head of strategic management within the Hertfordshire Business School. Other responsibilities include overseeing the school's Centre for Executive Leadership (CEXL). As an active researcher within the university's Managing Complex Change research group and EdRes network, his shared research and teaching interests include public service leadership, structural reform and policy within the education sector, spanning both compulsory education and the higher education sector. His work includes a diverse range of consultancies with charitable and educational bodies, supporting leaders in the development of critical reflexive skills, informed by relational sociology. He is also a director of a multi-academy trust, and a governor of a local authority school.

Dr Nigel Culkin is professor of enterprise and entrepreneurial development at the University of Hertfordshire. Nigel's interest falls into the broad field of regional innovation systems and entrepreneurial organisations, which have taken on an international dimension over the past six years. He was elected to the post of president at the Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE) in 2014 and in 2015 was invited to join the Peer Review College at the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Nigel is a regular contributor at the UNCTAD Expert Meeting on entrepreneurship and building productive capacities, held every year in Geneva. His new book, *Mastering Brexits Through The Ages: Entrepreneurial Innovators and Small Firms – The Catalysts for Success*, was published in May 2018.

1 Introduction

UK universities are putting more resources than ever into large-scale organisational change and capital programmes to keep pace with the growing competitiveness of the national and international market. Across the sector, overall annual surpluses are under pressure and, as the policy environment has shifted over the last 20 years or so, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been forced to increase efficiencies in a fluctuating funding environment and to try to respond to change with greater speed and agility. The Higher Education Council for England (Hefce) reported in November 2016 that the sector is anticipated to invest about £17.8bn in infrastructure programmes over the next four years; an average annual investment of £4.5bn and a 51% increase on the previous four-year average. With the potential of declining international and domestic student numbers, the success of such large-scale organisational change and capital programmes is therefore paramount to the whole sector (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education / Advance HE, 2017). In the light of these figures, it is worthwhile taking stock and inquiring into the kinds of pressures that senior managers are exposed to, how they understand them and what they find themselves doing with others as they participate in bringing about change.

In this paper we reflect on change initiatives within six HEIs across the UK and the degree to which they might be considered 'transformational'. This research has been undertaken by members of the Managing Complex Change (MCC) research group at the Hertfordshire Business School. MCC is a multidisciplinary research group which takes a practical, theoretical and critical interest in the complexities of change and the role of

leaders in public and private sector organisations.

The research undertaken by the group draws on the pragmatic tradition of Dewey, Pierce and Mead, as well as insights from social sciences, giving primacy to experience and emphasising the importance of human interactions. We also draw analogies with the complexity sciences, reflecting on how organisations and change emerge in the interactions of interdependent players. Our approach is shaped by our understanding of the complex interplay of stability and change, uncertainty and predictability, the local and global in organisational life.

In undertaking this research project we sought to make sense, together with the respondents in the study, of the rationale, processes and consequences of the programmes undertaken by participating institutions. We asked questions intended to identify the perceived benefits of the programmes, paying particular attention to objectives versus results, the qualities required in leading and the impact on staff, culture and broader institutional change. We were particularly interested in the unintended consequences of the change programmes under review, in power dynamics and changes in language and conversations: how managers talk about change shapes how they think and act. We were also concerned to inquire into how and why our respondents considered their projects 'transformational', given that the claim to have 'transformed' rather than to have changed things, is made ubiquitously. Six institutions are a small fraction of the total number of HEIs but the intention was to understand change processes in more depth in order to say some potentially generalisable things about the sector as a whole.

Humans...inhibit time. This means that...their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change.
CS Lewis The Screwtape Letters

2 Transformational change in higher education: a brief discussion

There is a spectrum of views as to why change is occurring in the higher education sector and the extent to which it is necessary and beneficial. However, whether one is in favour of the changes or against them there can be little doubt that *“transformation has been used ... to denote the repositioning of higher education to serve more efficiently as the handmaiden of the economy”* (Singh, 2001, 7).

As universities across the globe are increasingly considered to be key determinants in economic and social welfare, a number of institutions have gained attention by generating new models across the three missions of teaching, research, and knowledge transfer (d'Ambrosio and Ehrenberg, 2007). The generation of these new models is often attributed to programmes of 'transformational change' that have been carried out by the institutions in question. However, exactly what constitutes transformational change, and what makes it different from other types of change appears to be unclear. Current political orthodoxy, shared until recently among most political parties in the UK, remains that *“deep, radical and urgent transformation is required in higher education”* (Barber et al, 2013, 3) if institutions are to compete in a *“crowded market place”* and respond to an increasingly *“global, digital, and dynamic environment”* (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016, 311).

To a degree, the literature on transformational change is coterminous with the literature on transformational leadership, which Harvard Business School professor Rakesh Khurana (2010) attributes to the rise of agency theory in the political economy. In the late 70s and early 80s, with the decline in profitability of many corporations and following a downturn in the economy after the war in the Middle East and the hike in oil prices, monetarist economics took hold more generally. One consequence for organisational theory was the emerging idea that the key function of CEOs was to act as the agent of shareholders. CEO remuneration began to be linked with the success of the company, measured in the share price, and this marked the start of CEOs being rewarded partly in salary and partly in stock options. According to the emerging leadership scholarship written in recognition of the new economic orthodoxy, this required a break from the practices of stewardship of companies.

Where management is transactional, stewarding organisations for the benefit of multiple stakeholders, so leadership needed to become transformational, shaking up organisations to deliver a better return for their most important constituents, the shareholder. One key exponent of this set of ideas, although not the progenitor, is Bass (1990), who argued that there is a distinction between leaders and managers: where managers are transactional, leaders are transformational. Transformational leadership and change can be both learned and practised to bring about predictable results.

Not surprisingly, the ideas propounding the concept of transformational change reappear in articles relating to the higher education sector. In 1995, for example, Zlotkowski proposed that *“nothing less than a transformation of contemporary academic culture,”* is required in order to sustain service learning (Zlotkowski, 1995, 130). Advancing Zlotkowski's notion of change, Eckel et al (1998) suggest that *“transformation does not entail fixing discrete problems or adjusting and refining what is currently being done”* (Eckel et al, 1998, 4). It requires *“major shifts in an institution's culture – the common set of beliefs and values that creates a shared interpretation and understanding of events and actions”* (Eckel et al, 1998, 3). In summary, Eckel et al (1998, 4) describe transformational change as something that *“profoundly ... affects behaviour or alters structures..., imply[ing] a shift in values and assumptions that underlie the usual way of doing business”*. A key text identifying what are considered transformational changes in the public sector is considered to be Osborne and Gaebler's (1992) book *Reinventing Government*, which is credited with making popular what has come to be known as New Public Management (NPM) methods in the public sector more generally. The key insight perhaps lies in the subtitle to the book: *“how the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector”*. In the public and not for profit sectors too, the twin concepts of transformation and entrepreneurialism became entrenched.

For a comprehensive review of the literature of organisational change and development we refer readers to Weick and Quinn (1999) and Kuipers et al (2014). In brief, within the discourse of transformational change there are a number of characteristics of the change process

which have become so taken for granted as to be hard to question. Among them is the notion that change starts with visionary and inspirational leaders; the vision has to be exciting and stretching so that employees within an organisation can catch the excitement like an infection and be inspired to change their behaviour, becoming more motivated (perhaps best epitomised by Ackoff's idealised design method [Ackoff et al, 2006]); that employees need to 'share the vision' and often the values which inspire the transformational project; moreover, that those who don't or won't share the vision should go and work elsewhere (see Collins and Porras, 2000) on the 'benefits' of creating a 'cult-like culture').

There is something of a self-referential contention that all organisations that require transformation require a transformational leader (often thought of as an inspirational and charismatic individual, rather than a team of people) to effect the change. There is a plethora of papers and books around the topic of corporate communication and the characteristics of successful, transformational leaders. This in turn has led to numerous studies that set out to identify the leadership traits and attributes that are necessary for leaders in higher education institutions (Peters and Ryan, 2016). Not surprisingly the transformational leadership literature has provoked a countervailing critical leadership literature which questions many of the assumptions made (Alvesson et al, 2017; Flinn, 2018, Flinn and Mowles, 2014; Raelin, 2016; Tourish, 2013).

More recent interventions by politicians and policymakers have helped to shape the narrative of transformational change within the higher education sector in the UK. In 2005 the government published its Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology Strategy, which laid out the government's plan to use the IT revolution to manage the "*business of government*." Although the focus of this strategy document was to improve the delivery of public services, in essence the shift in language towards

one of 'transforming services' had repercussions for most policy areas. In particular, it was to have significance for the higher education sector. In 2005, Hefce¹ published its Strategy for E-learning, to coincide with the launch of the Harnessing Technology Strategy by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES). One of Hefce's key aims replicated the policy promoted by the government of using technology as an agent of transformation, but this time it was specifically aimed at prompting such change within the sector of higher education. When Hefce released its revised document *Enhancing learning and teaching through the use of technology* (2009)², included within the report was a definition of 'transformational'. Hefce concluded that 'transformational' referred to "*radical, positive change in existing processes or introducing new processes*." This shift in language was replicated across the UK. For example, in 2004 the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) introduced a Learning Transformation Programme. In the information provided to HEIs the SFC defined transformational change as requiring: "*a conscious and deliberate decision made by one or more institutions to do something differently in a systematic way across the whole institution, on a defined timescale of two or more years*" (Mayes et al, 2009).

Despite the amount of literature from across a variety of disciplines, as yet there is no consensus as to what 'transformational change' is. More wryly, the Guardian (2017) in its guide to office jargon suggests, "*transformative is just a fancier way of saying 'big' and 'nice', therefore transformational change must simply be 'nice, big change'*". However, on a more sobering note it also suggests: "*Just remember that it is also a transformative change when a company goes bust or its directors are imprisoned*".³

1 The authors realise that Hefce has now closed and has been assimilated into the Office for Students and Research England but recognise the publishing institution as was.

2 <https://www.dera.ioe.ac.uk/140/>, accessed 09 May 2019.

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2017/jun/21/from-decks-to-moats-the-complete-guide-to-modern-office-jargon>, accessed 16 July 2018.

3 Brief introduction to complexity and implications for a different understanding of organisations and change

We understand that one of the reasons that the the University of Hertfordshire Managing Complex Change group was favoured in its bid to undertake this research was because of our particular understanding of stability and change in organisations. It behoves us then to give a brief account of how a complexity perspective informs our particular process of inquiry, and what we might have paid attention to during the interviews and why.

Perhaps the principal difference between mainstream and critical management scholars, including complexity scholars, is their understanding of the role of managers and the predictability of change. Simplistically put, orthodox management literature focuses on the need to overcome uncertainty and assumes to a degree that managers are a special cadre of people who are capable of, or at least can be trained to, make forecasts and bring about a predicted future using appropriate strategies and tools. In more orthodox theories of change there may also be an assumption that change benefits everyone (who would stand against 'positive change for the good'?). In contrast, critical and complexity thinkers are likely to point to the uncertainty that arises from human interdependence and therefore assume that change may be more probabilistic and may indeed involve conflicts over interests. In critical organisational discourse scholars are always interested in Lenin's question: who, whom? In other words, who is doing what to whom and who benefits?

Complexity scientists draw attention to the non-linear nature of many natural systems which means the lack of a proportional link between cause and effect. Because of this and over the longer term, non-linear complex systems, like weather patterns, are predictably unpredictable, or regularly irregular, like fractal patterns. In simple terms and if we were to consider an organisation as a complex system, then a large organisational initiative may bring about a small change and a small change could escalate into a system-wide transformation, the so-called butterfly effect. From a complexity perspective, organisational change initiatives are likely to bring about predicted, unpredicted and unwanted outcomes. As researchers, then, we were interested in perceived successes and failures as well as unintended consequences. We may

also assume, like some of the more thoughtful respondents in the study we have just completed, that it is too early to tell whether the changes undoubtedly taking place in the sector are for the good and whether they will last.

Complex systems are often modelled on computers using agent-based models: one example would be birds flocking, or the activity of the brain which arises from the firing of large numbers of neurones. In other words, whatever dynamic patterns emerge in complex systems do so because of the interactions of all the agents. One might argue by analogy that this is no less true of organisations. In social life more generally, or in HEIs which are the focus of this study, what emerges in an organisation does so because of the different power chances between people, and the interweaving of intentions of all of the actors. This calls into question the idea that managers can have full control over interactions between large numbers of people, over conversations or over employees' understanding of their intentions. Each one of them enters into interactions with others with their own intentions, assumptions and histories. This insight gave us grounds for inquiring into power struggles and the ways in which power differentials are being negotiated.

One further analogy from the complexity sciences which might help thinking about change in HEIs is the interrelation and self-similarity between the local and the global. Local activities produce recognisable global patterns, while at the same time global patterns constrain local activities. For example, one of the outcomes of removing the cap on student numbers and a variety of governments making policies which marketise the sector is fierce competition between HEIs. This competition is felt as externally imposed, yet is likely to be experienced internally as well, as HEIs adapt to the new environment by ranking and target setting for their staff, reproducing the competition internally. The 'patterning' of competition between institutions does, to a degree, have a life of its own, but there is nothing inevitable in the way that it plays out over time within organisations. Markets are made by the activities of people participating in them. A question for us was how each respondent understood the dynamics of the marketised game they were obliged to play and to

understand how they were playing it. It has become obvious from undertaking this study that some respondents have a greater critical distance from what they may feel obliged to do than do others, and this criticality may aid or inhibit them from making the changes which are required of them.

As researchers writing from a complexity perspective, we have taken a particular interest in the claims of the different respondents to have dealt with the differing interests and valuations in the organisation into which they have acted. This is because as scholars interested in complex systems we are aware that the evolution of such systems arises from diversity. By diversity we refer to more than just diverse demographic base, but also to diverse thinking, understanding and values. This is likely to lead to disagreement and even conflict in organisations. However, without diversity there can be no novelty, no innovation and no originality. We are aware that orthodox change programmes often emphasise organisational alignment or 'buy in'. From our perspective emphasising 'alignment' and 'shared values', may inadvertently promote the opposite - inertia and stagnation.

In sum, and from a complexity perspective, we suggest that all social interactions have three fundamental and interrelated aspects: communication, power relating and valuations of the good (Stacey, 2005). From these assumptions we took a particular interest in how people talked about what they thought they were doing, what they were doing, how these ways of talking revealed power relations, and how respondents gave an account of their valuations. From this perspective, managers are active, albeit very influential, participants in change processes, affecting and being affected by them at the same time. We did not assume that they had the position of an outside observer who could, based on objective information, control processes of change but were co-creating the change processes they were themselves affected by.

4 Selection criteria for the cases and methodology

Institutions were consciously selected according to criteria but in the end, and pragmatically, the team of researchers could only undertake interviews with senior management teams who were prepared to set aside the time. For those who did, we are very grateful, given the reward for doing so for them was much less tangible than it was for us as a group of researchers.

The selected universities answered at least one of the following criteria:

- + Shortlisted for, or winners of, the Times Higher Awards (the Oscars of higher education).
- + In receipt of Hefce strategic development funding.
- + With a significant international expansion strategy (in the light of the Brexit decision).
- + Involved in partnership/joint venture agreements with other HEIs (either private or public).
- + Where transformational change was not successful or did not go to plan.

Sampling also took into consideration the Stern Review, the Higher Education and Research 2017 Act and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In addition, we developed a matrix to ensure that we included representatives from each of the major HEI groupings (Russell group, Million+ group, University Alliance, etc) and were geographically spread across the UK.

In keeping with our commitment to partnership working, we engaged with the Leadership Foundation (now Advance HE) to agree a final list, which included:

- + Cardiff University
- + Canterbury Christchurch University
- + Coventry University
- + Glasgow Caledonian University
- + Ulster University
- + University of Central Lancashire

For details of specific projects please see Appendix 1.

The case studies reflect a variety of change initiatives from relatively small, contained projects occurring in a single school, through to institution-wide initiatives which claim at the same time to tackle more inchoate concepts such as 'organisational culture'. These included initiatives to set up a subsidiary company of the university to handle the threat of differential fees, the introduction of a new student timetabling system or to gain compliance with new legislation, erecting new buildings and/or closing campuses, changes to professional support across the university, developing an institution-wide approach to entrepreneurship, opening campuses in London or in other countries, and merging faculties. Two of the case study universities had developed courses directly with local businesses to the extent that employees in the business had a direct role in educating the students.

Four of the case studies are new post-92 universities, all of which understand themselves and their contexts very differently. Many respondents in post-92 universities thought that they were at greater risk of marketisation and therefore needed to change more urgently than the older, more established universities, particularly those in the Russell group. Without further research it would be impossible to say whether senior managers in many Russell group universities think of themselves as proceeding at a slower rate of change than others.

Whether the projects in HEIs were large or small, most of the universities under review have had significant financial pressures. In addition, all involved some sort of restructuring of various departments, which resulted in changes to staff employment and/or terms and conditions. All the universities concerned, whether they charged student fees or not, faced dilemmas concerning falling student rolls/squeezed finances, or plans which required disinvestment from some areas of the institution in order to invest elsewhere.

From the interviews we gleaned some understandings of leadership practices during transformational change projects, and identified several common themes emerging from them: what the respondents thought they were doing when they were acting as leaders; how they understood change and/or transformational change; how they

developed relationships with their colleagues and direct reports; what they thought was important in the change process. In reporting our findings we have generalised from our interviews in order not to identify our respondents directly. This is the explicit trade-off we made with our respondents in order to gain their trust: they could speak more freely about how they had been involved in change processes on the understanding that we have not set out to embarrass anyone or to cast what they were doing in an overly critical light. Hindsight is always 20:20, and our intention was to understand as fully as possible the everyday ambitions and disappointments of undertaking radical change, rather than to point fingers.

Additionally, it is worth pointing out the process of generalising potentially covers over differences between respondents in what they think is important in the processes of change. Oftentimes there were differences even between colleagues in the same institution, with one senior manager convincing us of the importance of carefully getting support for new plans step by step and taking everyone with you, while another colleague getting straight to the point of telling us that they had decided relatively quickly to *“move a group of colleagues on”* who were considered to be underperforming or resistant to the changes being proposed. So, is there a contradiction in this tale, or have we just heard two representations of the same story? As researchers we were not alarmed by this since we did not aim to uncover some kind of true position. Rather, contradictions allowed us to explore the many dimensions of the complex phenomena that we were invited to study. Additionally, there is widespread contestation in society more generally about changes affecting the university sector, so there can be no surprise that our respondents too did not agree about everything.

We recorded and transcribed our 40 or so interviews. Most interviews were bilateral, but whenever we had the opportunity we interviewed our respondents in a group so that they could respond to each other's accounts of what their colleagues thought had happened. Having transcribed the interviews and having all read more than 500 pages of transcription the research team then met as a group to pull out and agree the key themes which

informed this report. This required a good deal of sifting and filleting looking for common refrains. Our aim has been to identify some themes which have emerged again and again as important for navigating change processes and senior managers' reactions to them.

Approaching this project from the perspective of complexity, which we have explored above, we sought to inquire into the following aspects:

- + The way the participants describe their own participation in the project.
- + The language the participants use while talking about change, particularly if this indicated a theory of leadership.
- + How the participants discussed changes in power relations, organisational politics and artefacts which came to represent change.
- + How micro-interactions, turning points, anecdotes or episodes illuminate, as a fractal, the kinds of patterns which may be appearing in the organisation as a whole.
- + Unintended consequences.

5 Limitations

It is customary to discuss the limitations of research towards the end of a paper. In this kind of research we are sceptical of the idea that it would have been possible to get close to an account of 'what really happened' [for extended discussion of this position see Mowles et al, 2008]. To draw on an African proverb, perhaps the central limitation of this research study is that until lions have their historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter. Expressing this another way, anthropologist JC Scott (1990) suggests that often the account of reality which dominates does so in order that those with greater power chances maintain their authority. Drawing on Scott further, the managers in our project to a degree presented a 'public transcript' of the process of change. Unfortunately, we were not able to access 'hidden transcripts', of those we spoke to, nor of those in less powerful positions in the institution. This is particularly pertinent when we heard things from our respondents, which had we more resources to pursue our inquiry, would have led us to follow up. For example, one respondent told us that in his university 150 people were pursuing a collective grievance against the university through their union, although this grievance was said not to be connected to the current change process or the current management team. If we had had time to follow up this lead, it might have offered an interesting counterweight to the mostly positive accounts of change which we were offered.

Our principal method to gain some insights into senior managers' understanding of, as well as into their participation in, change was to conduct semi-structured interviews with them in the institutions comprising this study. The managers were selected by the HEI's contact person, appointed by a very senior manager in each institution. This may also have limited our findings since we only reflect on the experiences of a small group of selected change participants.

We also understand that in order to engage the managers in the interviews, the contact person had to provide some context about our research, so even prior to our arriving for the interviews, the interviewees might have formed some assumptions and ideas about the intended outcomes of this research project. We felt that the limited time spent with each interviewee reduced our ability to explore those assumptions sufficiently.

6 General observations – varied responses to a marketised sector

Respondents were unanimous in understanding that new times require new measures, but were mixed in the degree to which they thought the changes were beneficial to the sector. Many expressed a profound sense of anxiety arising from increased competition and were sometimes caught on the horns of a dilemma of, on the one hand, not keeping up or, on the other, radically altering universities to their detriment.

In all cases, the senior managers' account of why their university needed to change was mostly predicated on their reading of the political economy. There was a good deal of anxiety expressed about competition with peers, decreasing student numbers and therefore potential falls in income. This anxiety was powerfully expressed as existential threat:

“

If you lose that hunger, then go and do something else. Because that is a threat, I think it's a genuine threat that if people are not compelled to do what they're doing and do it to the best of their ability and they don't have that hunger, then complacency very quickly settles in and you can bet your bottom dollar that someone else is going to be in there to steal your pants.”

The relatively new 'consumer' logic which accompanied rises in fees has encouraged a much greater focus on the student experience. Respondents had varying views on the wisdom of the marketisation of the sector. Some were highly critical but all were convinced that their institution's survival depended on being able to understand and play the game better. More importantly, some senior managers were able to put themselves in the shoes of many of the people they found themselves having to convince of the necessary changes, even if they themselves were not fully convinced:

“

When I look at the staff that we have around the university, the fact is that many, many of our staff joined this sector on a particular ticket and the ticket's changed and it wasn't something they had a vote in; nobody asked them but it has changed and one of the things we have particularly in

some of the areas is a number of our staff viscerally and philosophically oppose those marketisation changes and sometimes they oppose them to such an extent that they like to tell themselves and others those changes haven't really happened.”

While sharing some of the sentiments of those they managed:

“

I suppose that's one of the tensions with senior teams though, isn't it, in the sense of how much do we chip away at what a university is, to the point where it's not a university any more?”

Perhaps the only difference between those in charge and the rest in some cases was a feeling of responsibility to help shape a response so that the institution could survive, and should survive:

“

I guess they're communities of scholars, originally, aren't they? And that's one of the reasons why they've survived as an organisational form, they've been around for hundreds of years. So there are some really valuable things in there that mean I think the culture will outlive generations of leadership teams and there is only so much we can do, but tinkering with the structure, the frameworks we apply to that culture, I don't think are particularly helpful.”

One characteristic of being able to thrive in a senior management position in higher education establishments is probably the ability to live with contradictions which are not always possible to express publicly.

Some respondents were openly critical of the way in which the sector is subject to the whimsical behaviour of government ministers changing their minds about policy, particularly in the most recent period. And of course, marketisation was not the only reason for change: rivalry with a local university, responding to an opportunity or a need which presents itself locally, the successful application for a grant or an award, or an idea for a new initiative emanating from a member of the board could also play roles in instigating change.

Becoming market participants has led respondents to rethink their behaviour and, in general, this has led to the adoption of language of business, marketing, branding, visual guidelines and clichés – ‘sweating the assets’, ‘leveraging change’, ‘customers’, BAU (business as usual) – which has been unfamiliar until relatively recently in the university sector. This phenomenon was wryly acknowledged by some participants in the study in so far as part of their own ‘transformational journey’ had been the acceptance and use of vocabulary and terms which they found alien:

“

Oh, it was all you know, sort of get the monkey off your back and all those kinds of management book clichés really, it was all of that stuff, Americanisms and yeah, it wasn’t the language we were used to using at all. It would be really interesting to have done a study on to what extent now among those people who sat in those rooms and found his terminology a bit alien and confusing and hilarious at times; are they actually now using some of those terms? I think they probably would be.”

If one was looking for evidence that changes in practice are signalled by changes in the way that we think and talk about the world, then we were availed of this in abundance. Exactly what people meant by what they said, however, needed more careful exploration.

Participating in the market also involved an enhanced consideration of risk for respondents: the risks of undertaking change projects as well as the risks of not doing so. One phenomenon which shines through the interviews is a pervasive sense of anxiety about the pace of change, its inherent uncertainty, and having to juggle too many priorities. This made huge demands on respondents and we pick up on these again in the section on our respondents’ thoughts about leadership.

All senior teams in the study had experienced a good deal of turnover including the vice-chancellor role, the change in which often triggered a refocusing of strategy and sometimes further recruitment of senior positions. In each institution there was a liberal sprinkling of senior managers recruited from outside the university sector, who brought insights and experience from the civil service, other public institutions, industry, banking and manufacturing.

“

I was brought in because my experience in the health service has been about change and change delivery, change management and seeing change as not just a process but actually as an outcome in itself and looking to do that right across the entire piece; the way we do business, what business we do, who we do it with, the models of procurement, the dynamic from being someone who goes into market without knowing what they want to actually someone who goes into the market and knowing exactly what we want and then we get that...”

This is not to imply that that the impetus for change was most powerfully articulated by ‘outsiders’ to the sector: sometimes the strongest adherents of change came from senior managers who had been in the sector, sometimes in the same institution, for the longest. But there was a generally held view that the sector had to ‘catch up’ with what was happening elsewhere in the economy, whether the responded thought that this was necessarily a good thing or not. This reflects what is more broadly understood in the literature, that socio-economic changes in societies more broadly affect all areas of social life, even to the way we understand ourselves as individuals. Respondents also recounted stories about how they spent quite a lot of time visiting other institutions to find out how they were bringing about change, and what they might learn. Proud of their particular institution, they felt the need to play the game better, whether they thought the game was worth the candle or not.

7 Thoughts about leadership – in charge but not in control

The reality of having led complex change helped respondents understand the limitations of the narrative of leader as heroic and charismatic individual. Instead, the key skills of leaders are understood as storytellers in chief, sense-makers, obstacle-clearers and perspective-takers. They develop an ability to dwell for longer in uncertainty.

When first invited to reflect, the overwhelming majority of respondents articulated what we might think of as a conventionally orthodox understanding of what leaders do. They have visions, they set clear directions, they set out clear expectations, they are ambitious and positive. And there is no doubt that there is a good deal of consensus around the idea that change depends upon committed individuals, as well as the hard work of the groups in which they participate, who have unusual degrees of enthusiasm, ambition and sometimes charisma. However, as interviews progressed, it became apparent in most cases that most senior managers know that they don't know. As one manager put it, *"we're in charge but we're not in control"*. More thoughtful respondents went further in exploring what this might mean for them in terms of their own interactions with staff, and the extent to which you need to take people with you in any process of change:

“

You have to make them believe in you. You can't tell them what to do. Telling them what to do is not going to make it happen; you have to convince them that you're absolutely right, that it's the right thing to do for everybody and walk the talk; start doing it and look behind to see, do I have people with me or do I have to explain it again, and walk a little bit and you say it again, and you walk a little bit, ... and that's the difference between managerialism and leadership, but I would argue that those...that the people with the ability to rally the troops are...across the UK, probably in short supply."

And, from a different institution:

“

I think that the pitfalls are about taking people with you, I mean sort of the traditional thing, communication; helping people to see the art of the possible, making sure that you're having those conversations at all layers of the organisation."

So respondents were conscious of the subtlety of what they were attempting, needing on the one hand to persuade and convince, to 'take people with you', but on the other hand realising that it is necessary to 'treat people like adults' and recognise their working realities.

Despite all the initial talk of visions, direction and clarity, most respondents were keenly aware that strategy development and implementation is probabilistic. To an extent, everyone is feeling their way in the dark:

“

It was a bit of plan but also bit of...well, a lot of tweaking along the way because as things happen, you've got to adapt and be flexible and we didn't know what we didn't know."

Leaders might be out in front, they clearly have a role in convincing and persuading, but they might also have responsibility to get out of the way, or to clear organisational impediments out of the way of what their staff are trying to do:

“

It occurred to me that a lot of what we do is maybe not so much about doing this kind of charismatic leadership thing: it's about releasing potential about...just practical things like getting barriers out of people's way, so where the organisation actually inhibits creativity or collaboration across different areas, our job is to break those barriers down and make it easier for people to do what they want to do and try and channel those energies in a direction that aligns with strategic aims we might set for the place."

A number of respondents thus understood leadership as an activity which plays out in groups of people, where the imperative for leaders in some situations is to clear the path for those they lead.

In situations where you don't know what you don't know, and where there is simply one thing after another to deal with, one quality which might be required of a leader is the ability to cope a bit longer with the uncertainty of not knowing:

“

I sense a high level of anxiety because at the minute this pace, the pace of change and the space to stand back and reflect is...the pace of change is quick so at every action there should be an equal and opposite reaction but I guess there's not necessarily the equal and opposite and [it] just everybody's kind of meeting themselves coming back but I guess it's just keeping the calmness in that kind of pace of change.”

The poet Keats once referred to this quality as 'negative capability', the ability to sit with uncertainty, and sometimes even to communicate this uncertainty to others:

“

Sometimes we have to get a lot better at sharing why we don't know stuff, why we can't tell them how exactly it's going to feel in five years.”

This also involves the ability to change your mind about what you intended to do because of all the conversations you have been involved in with colleagues:

“

(you have to be) willing and able as leader to change your mind and to acknowledge that other people come up with other ideas that you maybe didn't think about that you think, well actually, why don't we consider that?”

During our interviews with respondents, we became aware that many of the leaders we spoke to started out by telling us about the importance of certainty, of knowing, but as we proceeded deeper into the interview were prepared to acknowledge that they didn't always know, and couldn't always know, or even that they might be wrong.

Telling a story of change and sensemaking together

One of the skills of a good leader, according to our respondents, is to tell a convincing story of change, sometimes repeatedly, and tailoring it to the needs of different audiences. There is a good deal of literature (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004) on why narrative is a good vehicle for conveying complex experience, and this is an insight which seems to have been intuitively grasped by a number of respondents:

“

The first thing for me is it's a narrative process; you need to tell the story and you need to tell it consistently and you need..., but you need to repeat that story enough times so that people start believing in that and that you based it on facts and why you're doing certain things.”

Of course, the success of storytelling depends on the skills of the storyteller and the ability of the audience to recognise the relevance of the story for them, particularly if it is a story about their possible future. So, there was a cautionary note from some respondents about the quality of the story and whether it appears grounded in the experience of those to whom it is being told:

“

You can inspire them; you can tell them there's this wonderful future, but if it's not connecting with their day to day reality, they're going to be sceptical at the very most; the worst is, they'll be backing off and filling in application forms!”

This seems to recognise, as we explore further in the section on transformational change below, that some audiences are likely to be a bit change-weary and sceptical about how bright the future might be.

All stories need to be interpreted, and the sense-making capability of leaders was regarded as a key skill by a number of respondents:

“

I think the most important leadership capability we have is the sense-making, well, the ability to help people make sense of the complexity of what's going on and the dialogue that you have to create about that, that kind of cartography of sense-making in a complex world that's quite challenging is probably more important along with some sense of direction of travel, than a Gantt chart or anything technical, you know.”

This focus on sense-making was mentioned by a variety of respondents, not just as a way to help more junior colleagues interpret complex and fast-changing circumstances, but as a principal method deployed at the top table. A number of respondents looked forward to the more informal meetings with their colleagues where they could talk about what was on their mind and make sense of their circumstances and feelings with trusted colleagues who needed to do the same:

“

...to update and share and splurge, you know, offload, but also just to chat and to sort of share things and talk about problems and what's bugging you and what's not working.”

In fast-changing circumstances that are difficult to make sense of, and which are likely to provoke anxiety, respondents often drew attention to the importance of being able to share, to say just what was on their minds, and discuss how they were feeling about things:

“

It sort of...tapped into more of the emotional side of the SMT and that was particularly important period in terms of coalescing these various members of the SMT.”

The researchers in this study felt privileged to be told about more intimate moments of respondents' experience which were clearly very important to them in helping forge the kinds of relationships which supported them through

testing times. Extreme change can provoke extreme feelings in people:

“

The pace of change is quick so at every action there should be an equal and opposite reaction ... it's just everybody's kind of meeting themselves coming back but I guess it's just keeping the calmness in that kind of pace of change; I'm not convinced that beyond that calm façade that some people might resent that there isn't the kind of inbuilt panic somewhere in there.”

Anxiety, panic, the potential for making a mess and getting humiliated: this is often the unreported side of organisational change processes, and which were occasionally revealed to us.

Perspective-taking

If they themselves were feeling battered by change, many respondents were conscious of the similar effect that the constant wave of changes were likely to have on those for whom they carried leadership responsibility:

“

They feel like they're kind of bobbing up and down on these waves of change that are coming out from the centre and they don't know what's coming next, they just keep bobbing up and down so they don't really know, they can't really see a pattern to things. They see changes in one direction one day and then in another direction another day. And I think people feel quite confused and disoriented by it.”

Being able to take the perspective of those affected by change who are not centrally involved in the discussions may allow managers better to frame how they are participating in the changes so that they can help employees make better sense of them. As a number of commentators have observed, (Baron-Cohen, 1997), perspective-taking is one of the grounds for empathy and is intimately connected with the theme of recognition, which we explore below in the section on the mechanics and dynamics of change.

8 The mechanics and dynamics of change – metrics, training and development, communication

In order to undertake complex change projects top teams have professionalised in terms of their own management training and the methods they deployed to keep on top of multiple change projects. Plans worked best, respondents agreed, if they were clear, prioritised and logical but also open to revision and responsiveness to circumstances. Informal off-agenda communication is just as important as ‘town hall meetings’ because it leads to more open discussion of a conversational nature where people can make better sense of what’s going on.

Every institution we spoke to had a strategic plan, master plan or some kind of corporate plan which was intended to make all the change projects and aspirations cohere. These were generally of a five/six-year duration, but some institutions were looking much further into the future, up to 15-20 years, which is sometimes a requirement when planning infrastructural change. These strategies were thought necessary by the overwhelming majority of respondents as a way of gaining focus, given the number of priorities that seemed to be emerging for each institution. Not having sufficient focus, not having sufficiently narrowed down priorities, was a common complaint across institutions. Whether these strategy documents did indeed pull all the threads together, or whether they were sufficiently adaptable to take account of the unexpected and the opportune, one can only conjecture.

“

So the sweet spot is somewhere between those two points where you’ve got some level of rigour and discipline so that you can provide the necessary assurances to your board but, at the same time, you’ve got room for creativity and innovation and spontaneity.”

But, for many respondents, corporate plans served at the very least as a defence against anxiety of not being in control.

All respondents described the ways in which they had socialised their planning processes by involving staff across the organisation in what they might describe as town hall meetings. These were thought of as ways to gain buy in or ownership or were even described as a means through which greater transparency of thought processes could be made visible. Although there is always a matter of judgment about how much to reveal, and when to reveal it:

“

And I’m not sure that I would be so transparent so quickly with individuals and that sounds like a bad thing but I don’t mean it like that; I think I would have been more measured with how that communication happened. I think we were finding a lot of things out as we went along.”

These big meetings appeared to be a combination of listening and persuading. Our respondents had clearly learnt through experience about how much to get carried away with the rhetoric of positive change:

“

...some people felt like they’d been kind of sucked into something on the promise that it would be a better world and then actually, it turned out to be about cutting head-count.”

Without having attended one of these meetings oneself, it is hard to gauge the extent to which the plans were presented as a fait accompli, and whether there was scope for negotiation and listening. It was clear from some respondents that not everything in the plan, or the ambitions for change, was up for grabs. Aspiring to be more democratic and open doesn’t, then, make an institution democratic:

“

That had to be a leadership-driven thing; that wasn’t something you could just ask all the staff, should we be international or not? We could have chewed on that bone for a long, long time. Somebody has to say, no, this is the direction we’re going in.”

What is and is not on the table for negotiation is more and less explicitly dealt with by our respondents:

“

...bottom-up type conversation where staff have been asked for their input, we've challenged that, or I've challenged that, but also we then shape that into being part of the move and by listening to and being able to say, well you might want that but that can't happen, or isn't going to happen and here's why, but here's why we want to do what we want to do, we'll be able to get on board ninety-odd percent of people and been able to move through in the timelines that we've set.”

In general it appeared from our interviews that the method most frequently employed by our cohort of interviewees was to take their ideas out into the institution and argue them through point by point, making judgements along the way about how, how much and when be to transparent, as well as how much to persuade their colleagues that this would be an unalloyed good for the organisation. It may or may not be for the organisation as a whole, but an initiative is likely to have differential effects on a variety of groups and individuals.

The degree to which institutions relied upon more technical project management methods to implement their plan depended upon the extent to which existing managers had this technical expertise, perhaps because they came from an industry background, or were prepared to buy it in, which a number of respondents did in the form of commercial consultancy, or it was demanded by one of their business partners involved in the initiative.

“

...so it's a very structured, logical way of breaking it down where we meet every week for a couple of hours and review all the work-streams and the plans and progress against them and we'll all know what we're doing and there's clear delineation between who does what and where accountabilities lie.”

Since universities themselves have come under more scrutiny and surveillance by the state, so they have internalised these methods of scrutiny themselves. All the senior teams were working to KPIs or some other measurement system which was monitored by the executive team, and/or the board in the form of dashboards or RAGs (red, amber, green traffic lights). Some institutions had put an enormous amount of effort and resources into creating these data dashboards. In one organisation, metrics were built into everyone's performance appraisal contract so that everyone in the institution was individually assessed against them, in one case up to four times a year. However, the defence of metrics was varied across the institutions we visited, with many respondents understanding the potential drawbacks of hitting the target but missing the point:

“

League tables are not a major driver of what we do on the ground here, our league table position is important but I think it's a reckless university that places league table position as a strategic aim. So no, the priorities we're establishing much more specific to our needs and what we want to achieve.”

Additionally, nearly all of the teams we spoke to had some kind of regular staff survey as a way of thinking about their own management performance, which they took seriously, and which they discussed together as a way of securing staff engagement and motivation. Senior teams took their staff survey results as seriously as they did the National Student Survey (NSS) results.

All of the institutions had some level of organisational and/or leadership development capacity which they drew on to further professionalise management practice. At least one institution had implemented coaching and mentoring support for their management cadre, many respondents had been on Leadership Foundation/Advance HE leadership development courses and a number had undertaken, or were undertaking, MBAs or leadership MAs. Respondents were keen to respond to the increased degree of management professionalism which was required of them, either by upgrading their own skills or

by hiring managers for different sectors onto their team. There are few areas of complete consensus among respondents about the kinds of processes they were caught up in, but we would argue that it is safe to say that the staff and management development which many teams experienced as a result of taking change seriously, was seen as a positive break with the past.

A number of outsiders to the sector expressed surprise at what they perceived to be the lack of sophistication of commercial acumen in the sector, or the functioning of teams:

“

To be candid, the attitudes and dynamics within the senior team are poor. There's a lot of rivalry, bitchiness, sniping, mini-alliances being formed and re-formed and all the rest of it. I had...I had expected, and this...stereotypical view from outside the sector is that the team managing a university will be academic, pretty benevolent, pretty analytical, maybe not the fastest moving but generally all good-hearted and social conscience together. The cat-fights have really, really surprised me here. Really surprised me. They're a real handful.”

Senior teams had to cope with integrating new members, differing insights and approaches, and had to address the dynamics of quite large and perhaps unwieldy management teams. Sometimes this led to the formation of executive groups within the larger senior team, which in turn led to pronounced feelings of inclusion and exclusion. The relationships among people sitting at the top table are among the most important relationships to focus on.

the agenda, if any. There were ‘big conversations’, institution-wide discussion fora, initiatives for managers to shadow students for a day, all kinds of ways of thinking about having conversations differently:

“

I said OK, it's not official, there'll be no minutes, there's no information from it or the discussion from it won't go anywhere, it's for our benefit so it's not formal, it's not official, you don't have to go, so what I'll do is I'll schedule it every month and whoever turns up, turns up. And we'll have a bite of lunch or have a two-hour talk through the issues.”

This kind of meeting may be important for a number of different reasons, particularly when senior managers are making demands of staff to think and act in different ways. To meet informally with staff and to make oneself vulnerable to whatever they might say, no matter how difficult to hear, signals a willingness to behave differently as a manager oneself. Managers undertaking this form of meeting might have to endure the kind of discomfort that they themselves are bringing about, consciously or unconsciously, for others by leading radical change. Respondents also claimed that this allowed for a form of reflection which is not possible in more formal, public meetings which have much less of an improvisational quality and depend more on speaking and listening, question and answer.

Informal communication with staff

Respondents in almost all the institutions visited mentioned a variety of ways in which they made themselves available to staff in informal ways, allowing a different quality of communication. There were different ideas about how more informal communication could take place, such as always being present at a particular time in a café on campus, or walking about to meet people, or organising more informal awaydays with far fewer items on

9 Some thoughts on how change comes about – relationships of power and mutual recognition

Most respondents argued that change projects are not just about visions, plans and metrics, but are complex social processes entailing the more or less open exercise and negotiation of power and politics. The development of relationships, allowing for new forms of identity to emerge through mutual recognition, are at the heart of successful change projects.

The majority of respondents were clear that the key determinants of successful change depended on forging new kinds of relationships, and putting these relationships at the heart of the change process:

“

For me was that it was about people round the table having relationships, understanding the impact that their area of work had on other people; thinking of it as a sort of cogs, if you like, in a wheel and so it's that understanding relationships.”

The strength of these relationships, particularly on the senior management team but not just there, then allowed colleagues to buffer the inevitable predictable unpredictability of the way the projects actually worked out in practice:

“

I think part and parcel of my job at the minute is relationship repairs because people actually go off half-cocked in my portfolio, go off half-cocked and they do something and I can tell you, the road to hell is paved with good intentions because I've been there so many times that you just need to be careful that whenever you are forging ahead with a new strategy, that you do it in such a way that you bring the people with you.”

Many respondents placed a great deal of emphasis on the strength of relationships between colleagues on the senior team. Getting to know each other well meant being able to pick up the phone in times of doubt or perplexity and was also a kind of insurance against the inevitable difficulties which will arise in a team, particularly in harsh times for the organisation where there may need to be tough conversations about the division of resources.

Working with power relations

A clear theme mentioned again and again was the notion of empowerment: many respondents argued that their initiatives for change were dependent on their more junior colleagues feeling 'empowered' to take decisions. There were a number of observations about why managers thought their colleagues sometimes did not rise to the challenge of working more autonomously. This might be due, respondents thought, to lack of practice, to the traditional and perceived separation between the managers and the managed, or it might be due to the double bind of, on the one hand, being held more accountable, and yet on the other being invited to take more risks.

Equally, not all respondents were aware that an ability to make colleagues feel empowered might depend upon the way they themselves behaved: if power is a function of a relationship, as some sociologists would argue (Elias, 2000), then more junior colleagues can only feel 'empowered' if the manager is prepared to give up some power. Nonetheless many respondents were acutely aware that participating in processes of change involved developing political acuity themselves, an enhanced ability to sense what they could and could not get away with in a group of colleagues, what needed to be attended to now and what could wait. Respondents in one institution pointed to the key role of the project manager in a particular project, not just because s/he kept on top of timelines and objectives but because s/he had a developed ability to sniff trouble when it was brewing and was able to keep different parties with perhaps different interests involved and engaged. In former times this skill might have been referred to as political 'nous':

“

And you could be the most equipped project manager, with all the theory and all the training in the world, but unless you get people, and none of us completely get people, unless you can find a way to navigate all of that, none of this succeeds, so I don't see this as a...we're going to get to this moment in time and it's going to be great and it's all done.”

Respondents reflected on the fact that the requirements to change, sometimes in a very short time, demanded exceptional responsiveness from all parties, and sometimes this adaptiveness was not forthcoming. For the change to succeed, then, might require having difficult conversations with members of staff:

“

There were, actually, yes, yes there were some casualties and when we looked at it, some of the things that were being found had been drawn to the attention of some middle managers previously and they had taken the decision not to do something about it because they felt it wasn't...it would be too difficult or whatever...”

This is not to say, as one respondent put it, that difficult conversations were always negative or had negative consequences for employment. However, there were a variety of approaches to the protection of staff and their jobs with some institutions adopting an explicit no-redundancy policy while others were prepared to ask staff to leave if their restructuring plans demanded it. All respondents expressed themselves committed to having good relationships with unions, which one might think of as one of the central power dynamics in many organisations between management and organised labour.

Whether groups of staff work cooperatively or not may depend on the extent to which they feel their concerns are recognised, and having their concerns recognised is not the same as having them agreed to. One group of respondents theorised this as a process of mutual recognition:

“

That means articulating a way forward that people can recognise themselves in...In recognising themselves, they come to recognise you as a leader. If they don't recognise themselves, they might comply, they might obey, but it's not leadership: it's coercion, and that's something different.”

The theme of mutual recognition is closely linked to the skills of leadership section above, where we drew attention to the importance of perspective-taking and narrative and sense-making. Leaders are capable of telling stories about change which are convincing to an audience and in which they can see parts for themselves in the drama of change. Of course, this also implies that some of the employees to whom the story is directed will be unable to see a role for themselves, and it is on this disjuncture that opposition turns. Equally, the ability of the top table to co-create a convincing narrative of change is essential to the success of the enterprise.

10 Thoughts about culture

Respondents were divided about what they thought culture means, and the degree to which it is possible to change organisational culture deliberately.

All were agreed that the way we behave towards each other, act and speak are important, but this may say nothing about what people are thinking, and longer-term traditions in the academy which persist in spite of the grandest change project.

The concept of culture arose again and again from the respondents' accounts of their practice, and there was a spectrum of opinion as to what culture is, and the degree to which it was possible to change it. Everyone was convinced that culture matters:



I think culture, what's the old thing, culture eats strategy every day for breakfast, and I think culture eats master plans for breakfast...so culture, I think, outlasts buildings."

But there was a good degree of disagreement about whether there is one culture or many, and the degree to which it is capable of being manipulated or transformable:



In my experience, organisations do not have one specific culture or one specific approach; they have a range of cultures and a range of approaches and when you bring people together, you have to recognise those differences and also recognise what can be brought to the table by individuals."

To a certain extent, respondents' understanding of what culture is and how it functions reveals their ambitions for their particular institution and how they might be realised. In one case, where the institution in question is very proud of its local roots and understands its development as being highly dependent on its organic connections with local communities, management strategies are geared towards developing the best of available talents:



There are elements of an institution's culture that are if not exactly permanent, they are very, very long-lived, despite the attempts of new management teams to come in and change them; there are things which are completely intrinsic to the nature of an institution, especially one like ours where we have a large percentage of our staff come from the local area."

Similarly, and in a different institution, a senior manager approached their change agenda with what appeared to him to be grounded realism:



We have to work with the culture that we've got, not the culture that we wish we had, so it's about putting in things that are realistic and grounded and having a pace of change that feels workable and sustainable, rather than coming up with lots of left-field stuff which may have worked in other organisations, in other contexts, and here just wouldn't happen."

This displays a detachment about what is commonly referred to as 'best practice', and an acknowledgement that context and history matters. Going back to one manager's reflections on the marketisation of the university sector as a whole, some managers engaged with the idea of culture from position of respect of current traditions and their historical antecedents.

By contrast, and where a senior management team displays ambitions beyond the local context (which is not to argue that any respondent was neglectful or dismissive of the region/city in which they were based) in some ways demonstrating a more abstract and idealised understanding of what a university is or might become, this may make them more ambitious to create a particular culture, a way of talking and behaving, rather than merely understanding and responding to it. One organisation had a particular way of speaking about the 'X way' of doing things, making culture an explicit theme of conversation, and we might add, a particular form of disciplinary control.

11 Thoughts about transformation

Many respondents were wary of using the term ‘transformational change’ with their change-weary staff, particularly if positive outcomes cannot always be guaranteed. The term may also create a burden of expectation on senior managers to ‘do something’.

As one might imagine, there were nearly as many views on what transformation might mean as there were respondents. For some, transformation means great big change which plays out over the longer term with no going back.

“

I think transformation means you go through a change that you can't undo. It means that something's changed so much that you can't imagine going back to the way things used to be.”

For them this means revolution, not evolution and it is something which they feel is their responsibility to initiate. The dynamic of competition is felt more keenly by managers in some institutions than by others, and this drives the kind and pace of managerial activity and the focus of senior managers:

“

And we obviously have the tensions all of the time about not moving fast enough, this is a confidence that I'll breach: the VC comes into a management meeting saying, we're not moving fast enough, we've lost...taken our foot off the gas, there's other people stepping ahead of us, we need to really step on the pace.”

Some others were deeply sceptical about the discourse propounding ‘transformational change’, were reluctant to use the term and displayed a good deal of critical distance. Indeed, there could be seen to be a split between respondents who considered transformation, which they understood as root and branch long-term change, as being both necessary and inevitable, and perhaps even within their gift to achieve, and those who thought it judicious to treat the idea with some caution:

“

I think there is a transformation required, but it's about how we present ourselves, it's about recognising our

strengths, drawing out things which are innate and things which have great potential for the future but it's certainly not about completely changing the institution, I think, there is a danger in that.”

Some respondents were clear that sometimes change arrives from left field whether the institution wants to change or not, so that universities are as much changed as are in charge of changing.

Conscious that there is a mutual amplification between a heroic leadership discourse which invests leaders with quasi-mystical and exceptional powers (along with exceptional salaries), and a rhetoric promoting ‘transformational change’ some respondents were aware of the pressure to ‘do something’ to demonstrate that they are in charge. Respondents in one institution in particular articulated the pressure they feel to make changes irrespective of whether they can be certain that the changes are for the good.

“

There are people who get high-level jobs, whether it's VCs or DVCs or PVCs or senior execs, but people get into jobs lacking experience or confidence, lacking clarity of purpose and vision and therefore... the easy thing is to say, oh well, we'll just restructure.”

And again, from another institution, a manager showed himself to be critical of taken-for granted ways of speaking about change, and how this might affect the people caught up in it:

“

People have almost become a bit blasé to change, so there's a perception here that by putting transformational in front of it, that it's somehow more powerful. I'm not sure how effective that is; I think that's probably just as kind of... derided as managerialism or jingoism by those that are affected by it. So I think it's much more about being able to describe what you think the impact is going to be as a result of the change and the impact will define whether or not that's transformational.”

For other respondents transformational change was less about structures, buildings or shiny initiatives but was more to do with changes in conversation and also a change in a sense of self, of identity:

“

I think that...the key thing about transformation is that it doesn't just change the outcome for an organisation or bits of the organisation, but that it changes the way people feel, behave and act and therefore it's got a much longer-term impact.”

Wherever respondents sat on the spectrum of evangelically supporting rapid change or treating it with more caution, all of them were conscious of the effect these changes were having on their colleagues, and the potential damage that they might cause to other things organisations value:

“

There is a lot of change under way coming up through how staff are feeling ...that stress does not fit well with an institution that cares about the individual.”

Sometimes respondents noticed that, despite all the talk of change, there were some organisational processes or phenomena which stubbornly resisted the changes that everyone wanted, much to everyone's frustration:

“

There are pockets of people that feel their voice isn't heard and all they want is change and all they want is improvement but they feel like they're in a vast emptiness where they get consulted, but nothing ever changes, so they're on consultation fatigue, so we keep consulting, we're going to change something, we're going to change something: what's your views, what's your views? And we never change anything.”

The kinds of things which people had in mind were over-bureaucratized procedures, stuck and unresponsive ways of responding to problems and unhelpful working practices.

So promoting change, particularly when framed as transformational change, involves thinking about how employees will respond to what is being proposed, whether one is actually in control of the process and whether one can be certain that it will proceed as expected, how it will affect people's sense of identity, and how it may not be focused on the things that really matter to people in doing their jobs.

12 Implications for the leadership of change projects in the sector and for further research

Here are some of the key qualities of senior managers and core practices which emerged from our conversations with respondents, offered by us as researchers with a complexity perspective. A number of these qualities and practices are unlikely to figure in many, perhaps more orthodox, accounts of 'transformational change' projects, which tend to focus on the idealised qualities of individual leaders.

The first is the ability to live with contradictions, ambivalence and doubt, which requires good judgement about when and if it might be expressed to others, either one's colleagues or the staff one is expected to lead. Similarly, and connected to this, is the ability to cope longer with uncertainty, what the poet Keats described as negative capability, more fully accepting that we don't know what we don't know, and this insight is key to much of human life. Moreover, the job of leading may involve having to take responsibility for initiatives about which the leader feels ambivalent.

The second is the development of practical judgment about when to intervene and when not to, when to express doubt, how to 'read' a group, and how to get alongside people. This has been explored more fully in another publication for the Leadership Foundation/Advance HE by Flinn and Mowles (2014). This includes the ability to acknowledge that sometimes other people have better ideas, or that you are wrong.

The third is the ability of leaders/managers to take themselves seriously as managers and seek different ways of developing their capacities technically, as well as developing greater reflective abilities and critical self-awareness. This involves not always swallowing taken-for-granted management concepts and jargon wholesale. It might involve resisting the expectation of 'doing something' for the sake of doing something. And it certainly involves accepting that there are things that are adamant in their resistance to being changed, even if everyone is clear that they would benefit if they could be.

Fourth, leading involves developing enhanced political judgement about how to work productively with power, when to encourage, when to direct, and gaining deeper insights into interdependencies.

Fifth, developing better political judgement implies an ability to work more skillfully in groups and to accept that conflicting over who 'we' think we are and what 'we' think we are doing together is immanent in all groups trying to achieve things together. The conflicts might be helpful to the process of change. Perhaps the key group which needs attention in profound processes of change is the senior management team itself, particularly if there has been a good deal of turnover in membership.

Sixth, a greater capacity to work in groups implies an enhanced ability to endure the negative emotions that inevitably result from profound processes of change, such as feelings of loss and lack of recognition. This in turn may provoke feelings of vulnerability in senior managers when they are exposed to their colleagues' strong emotions. Senior managers are likely to need to depathologise conflict, avoid retaliation, and work generatively with the opportunities that off-agenda meetings can bring (for a fuller discussion of these points, see Mowles (2017).

Seventh, senior managers are storytellers in chief, sensemakers-in-chief, recognisers-in-chief. Being able to tell a good story of change, which is uncluttered with cliché and jargon, which recognises the particular circumstances and identity of the community being addressed, and which brings that community into a different relation with themselves and with the storyteller, is one of the most important skills of senior managers/leaders.

These insights suggest further research is needed into the day-to-day practice of leadership, which focuses on the quotidian stresses and strains of getting things done with others, rather than on the rather grandiose and idealised discourse of leadership. The latter is sometimes hard to reconcile with people's experience of change which can involve both joy and disappointment, excitement and demoralisation.

Appendix 1

Summary of participating institutions' change initiatives as agreed with the institutions themselves.

Canterbury Christ Church University

Introduction

Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) has experienced significant change over recent years. CCCU was established in 1962 as a teacher training college with Christian foundations. After attaining university status in 2005, Canterbury Christ Church has seen substantial growth in areas of study and student numbers. As the university has grown, the variety of systems and processes have also evolved.

Christ Church Process Improvement Programme

The Christ Church Process Improvement Programme (CCPIP), arising from engagement with PA Consulting, was aimed at formalising processes and enhancing the student experience at different points in the end to end student journey. It included student recruitment, specifically a review of how the clearing operation is undertaken, as well as the introduction of an electronic student attendance system and processes and a review of academic administrative data and associated processes.

New initiatives for future development

Alongside the focus of CCPIP activities and the student journey projects, there are a number of other initiatives identified that relate to significant investment in new facilities and development of new teaching areas. These are longer-term development plans. There is a current project underway to provide a new arts building. This has secured £12m of investment from the university. This will give the current faculty improved facilities. A further building currently under development is the new School of Engineering that is currently in the planning stage. This £90m project is taking advantage of a local site that was a disused prison building. Planning is underway and the building will house facilities for this new area of teaching

expertise for the university. A female head of engineering has been appointed, with the view that the school will have an inclusive ethos and increase the numbers of women going into engineering. It is anticipated that students who might not normally come to Christ Church will think about studying there, which could include pupils from local grammar schools. A third initiative is a joint bid in partnership with the University of Kent for a medical school. The bid is a response to a shortage of medical places in the south east of England, and the intention is to offer places from 2020. The Canterbury Christchurch and Kent partnership is in competition with seven or eight other universities who do not currently have medical schools and they await the results of the bidding process. Each of these projects has arisen from the university's strategic plan, and it is recognised that these areas offer increased study opportunities to the current portfolio of programmes for Christchurch Canterbury. In identifying and taking forward these large construction projects, it has been recognised that their success will rely on student recruitment into these new areas as they require the commitment of substantial resources.

Changes in leadership and management structure and processes

There have been significant changes in the way that Canterbury Christchurch operates. The current vice-chancellor has led the restructuring of management processes and responsibilities for leadership and management, with an ongoing dialogue focused on continuous change. One development has been the introduction of the senior leadership group that meets four times a year, and a senior leader sub-group that develops the agenda for the senior leader team to address. The ongoing projects identified have arisen through organisational discussions on how CCU can respond to the increased challenges and opportunities in higher education. The Change Portfolio Assurance Board has been set up to monitor the progress of projects overall, respond to priorities and potential conflicts in the delivery and implementation processes, and to assess and monitor risks. One of these risks has been identified as dependencies on particular staff, and staff wellbeing more

generally, in the face of the significant change impacting on the everyday work at CCU. The capital projects, being managed by a recently recruited director of estates and facilities, are addressing future opportunities for growth and partnership, working to extend the teaching of CCU potentially into engineering and medical, and form part of a broader strategic agenda for change.

Coventry

Introduction

The Institute for Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering (AME) is a part of the Centre for Manufacturing and Materials Engineering Research at Coventry University and formed the basis for reflections on change at the university. AME is supported by Hefce's catalyst fund and is a collaboration between Coventry University and Unipart Manufacturing Group.

AME has built a bespoke 'Faculty on the Factory Floor' at Unipart's manufacturing site in the heart of Coventry, with a commitment to delivering world-class manufacturing and materials engineering research. Bringing together the best in academia, industry and research and development in a live manufacturing environment, the aim is: developing industry-ready, world-class engineering graduates; accelerating next generation powertrain-related technologies for automotive, aerospace, oil and gas, rail and renewables; disseminating research and new technologies for the benefit of Unipart, its suppliers and wider industry; and driving economic growth by making UK engineering and manufacturing globally competitive

Projects

Unipart Joint Venture

In 2013 Coventry University and Unipart launched a Hefce-funded collaborative project to develop a new Engineering and Manufacturing Institute on an existing Unipart site located near the university. The Hefce catalyst fund provided £7.9m, which was met with £17.9m from Unipart for the facility along with a further £5.6m towards

student scholarships and product research and development. The custom-built facility offers both undergraduate and postgraduate students a learning experience located within a live manufacturing environment. In addition to benefiting directly from the Hefce funds, for Unipart the project will deliver industry-ready engineering graduates, new capacity for innovation and closer links to academic researchers operating within their field. For the university this represents a significant pedagogic advancement and access to industry to support research and commercial opportunities. In the first year the project recruited seven undergraduate and four MSc students, accessing university clearing to fill the spaces. In the second and third years these numbers grew to 33 and then 38 students. The discrete partnership project will also lead to restructuring of Coventry's manufacturing and engineering research, bringing closer alignment with the emerging industry opportunities. The joint venture, formally titled the Institute for Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering (AME), is located within the Centre for Manufacturing and Materials Engineering Research, which is subsumed under a university-wide, interdisciplinary Institute for Future Transport and Cities.

Coventry University College

In response to a changing market environment, Coventry University focused on the development of a diversification strategy in order to defend against the growth in higher education and the potential for differential fees across the sector. The launch of Coventry University College 2011 (CU Coventry), followed by campuses in Scarborough in 2014 and Dagenham in 2017, represents a 'low cost offer' serving Higher National Certificate, Diploma and Full Honours degrees. The offering was carefully structured around a flexible curriculum model that would cater to a range of entry points, study patterns and pathways and offer block delivery. At a reduced cost of £6000-£7000, the college aims to meet the needs of students interested in applied subject areas with reservations about the costs associated with more traditional forms of study. Across the campuses over 2600 qualifications have been achieved. As local markets change the institutions can also rapidly adapt their portfolio of subjects with the potential to shelve

and reinstate courses quickly to accommodate demand. Leadership of the colleges through their development was kept distinct from the rest of the university group's portfolio. The colleges are distinctive from the university's offerings with regards to the flat structures, loose job descriptions, local contracts, marketing, registry and business improvement processes. However, as this offering matures there is the potential for increased formalisation; with the continued priority for the colleges to make a contribution back to the university centre.

Change processes

A number of discrete change projects across the institution are positioned within a wider-reaching and protracted development trajectory. Such change is most evident in broader structural reforms within the institution, going back to 2014 and culminating in the launch of a new faculty structure in 2015 containing four faculties and 13 schools. Public justifications were rooted in strategic plans for the university's rapid expansion, diversification of the portfolio and clear academic agenda. These were coupled with the tacit recognition of emerging opportunities to build on beneficial corporate and research collaborations. One such driver can be seen in the increased internationalisation of the university through its collaborative partnerships and increased recruitment. This is evidenced particularly in a growth in engagements in Brazil and China, as well as expanding research collaborations in locations including Australia. This is echoed in the university's 2021 corporate plan, incorporating a number of pillars including international development. Further to this the portfolio, incorporating the funding of new and innovative pedagogies and new learning spaces, spreads the risk in an increasingly turbulent environment. Internal drivers included the need to balance the size of schools and faculties more equitably, where this would also impact upon resource allocations for both.

Leadership and change

The emergence of new collaborative projects with industry was mirrored in the restructuring of research groups to support this new alignment. With changes to structure, leaders reflected on the challenges of maintaining trust and mediating between the 'winners' and 'losers' of organisational redesign. Anecdotally, the difference between 'small thinking' and 'big thinking' was explained in terms of the resistance to changes that would redefine how and where individual researchers would contribute within new structures, and how effectively those structures capture the perceived distinctiveness and importance of researchers' own research areas within the new overarching titles.

Cardiff University

Introduction

Founded in 1883 as University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff University is one of Britain's leading research universities. In 1972 the institution took the name University College, Cardiff and in December 2004 the Privy Council approved a new supplemental charter granting it university status. The legal name was changed to Cardiff University (making it independent of the University of Wales). Today, Cardiff University has a significant economic and social impact on Wales and the UK as a whole, contributing in areas such as employment, research funding and teaching and learning activities.

Campus Development Project (including National Software Academy)

Cardiff University is undertaking its largest campus upgrade in more than 20 years, amounting to a £600m investment in the future of the institution. This involves the creation of a £300m Innovation Campus; £260m on its teaching, learning and student experience, and a further £40m in initiatives to promote growth in the economy and industry. The Innovation Campus project, which seeks to transform a disused railway yard into an innovative research space, is currently underway with two facilities

open (Hadyn Ellis building and the Cardiff University Brain Research Imaging Centre) and work starting on a further two buildings (Innovation Central and the Translational Research Facility).

The National Software Academy (NSA) project came out of a programme of work seeking to regenerate Newport on behalf of the Welsh government – the Newport Business Development Task Force. A recommendation from the business community was to address the gap in digital skills, initially focused on Newport but soon recognised as a problem for the whole country. The outcome of this programme of work was the National Software Academy, a partnership between Cardiff University, the Welsh government and industry representatives. The aim of the NSA is to address the shortfall of qualified, industry-ready software engineers by producing sought-after graduates with industrial experience who will be recognised as leaders in their field. This is achieved by combining teaching and training in a custom-built commercial/IT environment, developed with industry and local businesses. Key features of the NSA include extensive engagement with industry throughout the degree, a focus on client-facing projects and a focus on teamwork and industry working practices.

The “*outside*” factor was Simon Gibson, co-founder of the Alacrity Foundation, CEO of Wesley Clover (an investment fund specialising in seeding technology companies) and Newport Business Development Task Force lead. Alacrity’s model offers a novel means of attempting to facilitate regional development through a programme that intertwines elements relating to entrepreneurship, innovation, and network policy and practice. The engagement is novel in the sense that it seeks to de-risk the entrepreneurial and innovation process in a regional environment that is not traditionally strong in this respect. The aim was to use the processes developed by Alacrity to help the School of Computer Science develop a more innovative approach to a) course development and b) working with external stakeholders. Further, it has set out to change the way the school viewed (the importance of) teaching in relation to TEF; and how learning and teaching strategies had developed under the previous

management. So, although the original project focused on a course that was run offsite with different objectives, the success of the NSA has been unquestionably good for the school and its management recognises that it is a flagship for teaching software engineering. It is increasingly recognised across the university, as, according to the school management team,



Everyone wants to come and see the Software Academy... it's recognised across the UK; no one else teaches software engineering in that way. Everyone who comes to visit is massively impressed by the students and the layout.”

The challenge for the school is to ensure that prospective and current students are not left with the perception that excellent and innovative teaching is only confined to the NSA rather than spread right across the school. The project has, though, provided an opportunity to redevelop the whole programme in that way.

New initiatives for future development

Alongside the delivery of the project, the NSA provided a completely different set of issues to comprehend. First, it was associated with a Welsh government initiative, designed to regenerate the city of Newport. That was something completely different for management to grasp as, apart from their placement programme, all the university’s activities are in Cardiff (eg the students’ union, office accommodation, travel etc). Second, it helped to shine a light on opportunities that were being missed, for example, in student recruitment process. Senior management recognised the institution had become accustomed to seeing themselves as a selecting institution and not a recruiting institution and that was somewhat arrogant. The introduction of a new vice-chancellor (see below) helped them to acknowledge that this had to change. Third, Cardiff had neglected to invest in its infrastructure, which was falling behind their competitors, which was why a university estates masterplan was developed and is the main reason there are so many capital projects running now.

The issues discussed in the above paragraph contributed to a shared belief from the staff interviewed that the NSA was, or has the potential to be, transformational. For an applied college, it can become a model to deliver other programmes eg architecture, where students are attached to a profession. However, the thing about the NSA was that it had clarity of purpose from the outset and clarity of sponsorship as well. In project management terms, the three components – government, industry and academia – each possessed a sponsor with clear and tangible benefits that each sponsor could touch. As such, it was an equal partnership where the benefits for the partners were no less important than to any of the other partners. In most HEI projects, this is not always the case.

Changes in leadership and management structure and processes

The present vice-chancellor, Professor Colin Riordan, joined in 2012. He made it very clear that he had arrived with a new strategy, which he communicated to the university through a large number of town hall meetings. This was a deliberate (and highly visible) tactic, demonstrating a new approach to engagement, which staff now refer to as Cardiff's Civic Mission. In essence, the vice-chancellor saw Cardiff as an international university with its roots firmly in Wales. The communication process lasted two years. In 2015, the vice-chancellor announced that Cardiff would have five new flagship research centres, each focusing on a world issue. These included resolving chronic diseases; the scarcity of water; the prevention of crime; studying big data; and creating smarter energy systems. In parallel, there have been significant changes in the way that Cardiff University operates. The 25 academic schools are now organised into three colleges; the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; the College of Biomedical and Life Sciences; and the College of Physical Sciences and Engineering. The new university executive board is the senior management team of the university. It is responsible for developing and implementing strategy, operational plans, policies and procedures, setting budgets, and monitoring operating and financial performance.

Glasgow Caledonian University

Glasgow Caledonia University (GCU) was formed in 1993 through the merger of The Queen's College, Glasgow (founded in 1875) and Glasgow Polytechnic (founded in 1971). Its motto is University for the Common Good. Recently Annie Lennox, Scottish singer-songwriter, human rights activist and philanthropist, was installed as GCU chancellor, succeeding Muhammad Yunus, Nobel peace prize laureate and social activist.

Strategy 2020

In 2015 Glasgow Caledonian University introduced an ambitious Strategy 2020 plan. Following the introduction of this strategy, a suite of change programmes was put in place to facilitate the delivery of strategic goals. The change programmes are *"cutting across different schools or different departments in the university"*, so they cannot be led by a departmental or school leader. Initially the suite of change programmes was overseen by a project board, which has now been dismissed, and the projects are currently being overseen by the executive board. Some of the projects have been implemented, eg Timetabling and Research Support. Others, such as Student Information Management System, are still being developed.

Following various staff feedback exercises, the executives identified change management as a weakness that needs addressing. Rather than accepting that communication and change management will always feature as weaknesses on staff survey, the senior managers adopted a different approach to communicating with staff. Open staff meetings with one of the executive board members, under the Chatham house rule, take place monthly. Initially the staff were reluctant to challenge the executives but more people are now engaged in those meetings and the executives see them as an opportunity to address specific concerns of various staff members.

The New York campus

Following the successful opening of a GCU campus in London, in 2013 the university opened a GCU campus in New York, a first UK university to do so. The development

was praised by the Scottish politicians. However, at the time of its £10m SoHo campus launch the university did not have a licence to award degrees, which drew criticism from the trade unions. In 2017 the licence to award degrees was granted by the New York State Education Department although there remain concerns about this heavy investment in the age of austerity.

University of Central Lancashire

Introduction

From its foundation as the Institution for the Diffusion of Knowledge in 1828, the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) has maintained and built upon a culture characterised by its progressive, yet often subversive, approach to community, pluralism and inclusivity in the pursuit of practical knowledge. These principles can be seen to feature heavily in its ongoing investments and strategic priorities which take the university through to 2020. In 2015, UCLan launched its ambitious five-year project to develop and regenerate its Preston campus in an effort to pursue further seamless integration between the university and its home city.

The UCLan Masterplan

The UCLan Masterplan represents an overall investment in the region of £200m. This capital investment is embodied in new social spaces, an Engineering Innovation Centre, a faith and spirituality centre and its centrepiece – a student centre and civic square. The new buildings, alongside the impact on existing spaces, serve to further extend the sprawl of the university spatially into one of Preston's major economic quarters, and vice versa. The nature and scope of the development serves not only to further develop the academic and commercial collaboration offering of the university, but to enrich the student and local community experience through facilities and venues designed to bring people together within a relaxed environment. In UCLan's own vision statement it articulates: *"The new facilities will attract and retain new talent and create a cutting-edge environment that*

showcases UCLan's key principles of openness, transparency and accessibility, while developing a skilled workforce which meets local, national and international needs". While the Masterplan can be seen to represent a significant physical transformation, it is located within a university philosophy and history built on differentiation and identity. Bucking many national trends of the time, even before the Masterplan UCLan's philosophy could be seen embedded in the launching of a new medical school in 2014, serving small international cohorts. Prior to that UCLan's commitment to investment was evident in other significant capital projects including the opening of the JB Firth Building in 2011, in homage to one of the founders of forensic science in Britain. In the same year, honouring a local footballing legend, the Sir Tom Finney Sports Centre was opened. The links between locale and identity, between past, present and future, serve to underpin transformation not as a project, but as a purpose.

Evolution at the top table

In the midst of continuous physical change, embedded in a strong sense of continuity of spirit, UCLan has also encountered much change at its top table. In a context characterised by changing conditions in the higher education sector, increased competition with other regional powerhouses (notably Manchester and Liverpool) and uncertainty over future conditions, UCLan has found itself recruiting to many of its executive leadership positions, and, in doing so, drawing on an increasingly diverse range of professional backgrounds. This has included new members of the team at the pro-vice-chancellor level and a largely new team at the deputy vice-chancellor level (one internal appointment and one from another HEI). Over the last five years, UCLan has encountered a quick succession of vice-chancellors, a new chair of the board from a commercial background, new board members from broadcasting and financial services and a new chancellor. UCLan finds itself forging a balance between old and new, historical identity and contemporary relevance, responsiveness to change and proactive self-development. In maintaining the constant paradoxes encapsulated in transformational change, UCLan embodies the Prometheus' ship of higher education Institutions.

Ulster University

Introduction

In June 2015 the University of Ulster welcomed a new vice-chancellor, Paddy Nixon, who decided he wanted a change in his management team and a new structure for the university in order to be market and REF-ready. Nixon, who is *“very rich on the data science area and... understands the importance of these metrics”* is credited by one of his colleagues with giving the institution *“a very focused and almost a forensic”* means of looking *“at how we take these targets and move them forward”*. As a result the university underwent a major period of restructuring whereby six faculties became four, 33 schools were reduced to 22, and plans were made to reduce student numbers over a three year period by 1,200 with a corresponding reduction in staff numbers of 149/150. Changes were also made to the university’s ‘everyday’ title (changed to Ulster University) and its logo.

Five and fifty (five year strategy to the fiftieth anniversary)

In 2016 Ulster University initiated a new strategic vision designed to drive the university forward to its 50th anniversary in 2034. Four core areas were identified to deliver ‘transformational change’ (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience; Research and Innovation; Civic Engagement; Academic Planning, Partnership and Internationalisation), and within these four areas a number of transition projects were identified. Alongside the identification of the core areas has been a parallel workstream to develop KPIs for each of these, which will ultimately feed into a balanced business scorecard for the entire organisation. The university staff interviewed (senior management team members) identified the Greater Belfast Development as a driver for much of its change (see Table 1). Citing other drivers such as the universal audit of university buildings in 2006 and the financial implications for Ulster of operating across four campuses, a decision was made to close the Jordanstown Campus, which is located seven miles outside of the city, and move 15,000 staff and students into the City of Belfast. This raised a number of concerns among staff, not least the issue of travelling and car parking (Jordanstown currently has 2500 car parking spaces ,the university accommodation in the city will have 350 spaces).

Table 1: Greater Belfast Development change management strategy

University strategies	University action plan	Greater Belfast Development
Teaching and learning strategy	Teaching and learning strategy plan	Didactic to collaborative teaching Student hubs 50% utilisation for central teaching space ICT to enhance student experience Promote interdisciplinary working Centralised IT provision
Research and innovation strategy		New model for research space allocation Research transition space strategy Faculty exhibition areas
Organisational development strategy		Centralisation of all technical staff Centralisation of specialist services Collocation of faculty and school offices Receptions
Students' union strategy		Departments student focused Sports Jordanstown student residences
Estates strategy	University travel plan	Sustainability 40% share office accommodation provision GBD travel plan
ICT strategy		GBD ICT strategy library

Source: Extract from GBD Change Management Strategy (University of Ulster)

Other initiatives

Ulster University, in collaboration with three UK partner universities (Aston University – project lead, Birmingham City and University of London), secured £420,000 from Hefce's catalyst fund to raise aspirations and enhance employability of students from communities frequently under-represented in higher education. Ulster University's plan was to target black and minority ethnic students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as disabled, mature and part-time students, with a range of employability initiatives including the Global Ambassadors Scheme, which allows

undergraduates to take part in international work or study. Participation in the scheme gives students the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge on an international stage, making them hugely attractive to employers operating in a global environment. The initiative was designed to last 18 months, with partner institutions sharing best practice, learning from successes and introducing new trialled and tested evidence-based programmes.

Changes in leadership and management structure and processes

Across the senior management team interviews for Ulster was a single, consistent narrative that communication was key to the successful implementation of change. This was discussed as a top-down strategy and something that was seen to be commensurate with the arrival of the new vice-chancellor. Every Monday morning the senior management team come together for an hour and a half. It was likened to 'show and tell' in a primary school, when each of the senior management team were able to raise and discuss 'big ticket items'. Subsequently, each of the senior management team had introduced something similar into their areas. Initially, the process was more formal with rounds of public meetings with staff, whereby the senior management team explained the changes and the need for change and in turned listened to the responses of staff members. More recently these meetings appear to have become less formal, but the dialogue and its importance has been retained by a process whereby the senior management team, *"walk the boards; talk to the technicians, talk to the academic staff."*

There was an implicit acceptance that the speed of change was rapid and that this was having a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of some staff, although there did not seem to be an official 'solution' or discussion about how this might be avoided and or dealt with. (*"...the pace of change is quick so at every action there should be an equal and opposite reaction but I guess there's not necessarily the equal and opposite and it's just everybody's kind of meeting themselves coming back but I guess it's just keeping the calmness in that kind of pace of change; I'm not convinced that beyond that calm façade that some people might resent that there isn't the kind of inbuilt panic somewhere in there"*).

The university recognised itself as having a number of strengths in areas such as research excellence and resilience. The multi-campus setup of the university was seen as an institutional weakness as well as a strength: *"The weaknesses: I think one of the challenges we've got is that we've got this kind of disparate hotch-potch of campuses where some people, whether you think you're all a member of Ulster University, the campuses are characterised very differently..."*

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