

Mapping the new HE landscape

Major change is guaranteed after the White Paper and new HEFCE plans: an introduction

As universities and colleges struggle to get to grips with the implications of a daily evolving government policy and proposed funding changes, one outcome is a certainty: the landscape of higher education will be forced to change dramatically in the wake of recent initiatives flagged in the White Paper and through recent HEFCE plans.

INSTITUTIONAL MISSION

Potential funding changes mean that institutions able to collaborate regionally and develop some level of critical mass with like-minded partners will benefit more than those isolated or wish to "go it alone". Recent HEFCE plans suggest that the way forward for institutions is to be clear about their strengths and honest about weaknesses and to aim to be "increasingly interconnected" with each other. The possibility remains that some organisations may be forced to divest some research interests to concentrate more fully on their teaching provision, so changing the nature of the traditional institutional mission.

RESEARCH FUNDING AND HR STRATEGY

The White Paper suggestion to cut funding to academic departments rated 4 and under will have a radical effect on every aspect of academic life in UK higher education. Potential problems abound, including the likelihood of new "transfer wars" in the recruitment and retention of key research staff, a situation which will be exacerbated by the drive in some quarters to establish 6* research status.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Again, collaboration is on the agenda and especially so in terms of maximising education-to-business partnerships. The imperative is for universities to increase alternative sources of funding and to adopt a more commercial approach to the financial management of their organisations. This will embrace the more strategic management of everything from alumni relations management and the souring of endowments, through to the development of return-on-investment criteria and pricing structures for tuition fees.

MARKETING AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

The customer focus in education is here to stay, with a new emphasis being placed in understanding consumers and their buyer behaviour patterns. Managing expectations and ensuring fulfilment on the delivery of service level promises will become a must for all institutions.

QUALITY

It is expected that increased student choice will drive up quality. An acknowledgement that effective student decisions are enhanced by appropriate advance information will drive a new annual survey that will provide information on teaching, quality, facilities and student perceptions.

ADMINISTRATION

The White Paper has little to say about the two-thirds of non-teaching staff in higher education. However, non-academic staff provide much of the backbone of the major support and service systems which determine the relative quality of student experience. Without doubt, the quality of administrative systems and services will need to constantly improve to match the expected changes in teaching and research quality and organisations will need to be able to demonstrate this "upward" trend.

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