The art of success:
Characteristics and behaviours that set HEIs apart

Cutting through the mass of information that a higher education institution must assess in order to manage its planning processes is a tough business.

There is always a need to step back and take an objective view of the organisation. To re-examine its ambitions and activities in order to define a broader (and clearer) picture of what has and hasn't worked and what the organisation hopes (and needs) to achieve in the future.

Within the last two years, planning processes in higher education institutions have revealed that, as we know, times are changing. New competitive contexts are coupled with more risks to explore and address. Each year new factors or concerns emerge, but, so too, do characteristics or behaviours that help to define successful institutions.

Of the many factors emerging from sector benchmarking processes conducted by Stamp Consulting during the last two years, the following have been flagged repeatedly across a wide range of HEIs.

SECTOR CRITICAL RISKS

Mapped critical risks across the sector: behaviours and characteristics that generate problems for institutions.

[1.] SILO ACTIVITY RATHER THAN STRATEGIC, COHERENT RESPONSE

For example, missing opportunities to take a broader view of specific problems or to map effectively the wider implications of what may seem to be "local" difficulties. These can (and often do) have wider implications for the institution as a whole. Recent instances have centred on student dissatisfaction issues, for example, which were thought to be, initially, a faculty or school concern, but spread to become organisation-wide problems.

[2.] LACK OF BUSINESS ACUMEN

This has emerged as a major risk for some organisations. However resistant institutions may be to the idea of a business model for higher education, if an institution wishes to be successful and able to make choices about its investment focus and future ambitions, a business centred approach to organisational management is required. Institutions increasingly need to nurture or import sound business expertise.

[3.] MIS-MATCH BETWEEN TARGETS AND INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY

Yes, this does happen (and is linked to 2, above). It has been known for institutions to miscalculate the enormity of the domino effect on infrastructure of a planned increase in international or postgraduate recruitment, for example or a change in portfolio focus.

[4.] FAILURE TO ADJUST TO SHIFTING MARKETS

Holding on to the comforting mantra of "we've always done things this way and it's worked so far..." is a recipe for risk. Institutions must map market shifts and the changing needs and expectations of stakeholders or they could be left with outmoded portfolios and a brand proposition that lacks the basics of their peers' competitive edge.

[5.] LACK OF AWARENESS OF RELATIVE POSITIONING

This is an acute concern, for example, for regional post-1992 institutions striving to extend to a national agenda and for research intensives jostling for position in the global top 50. In reality, the science of positioning is akin to three dimensional chess (if not more complex!): ambitions for movement must be tested and adapted constantly within the context of the predicted and potential manoeuvres of competitors and peers.

[6.] DIFFIDENCE

If an organisation is successful, it must demonstrate and explain in what ways this is true. Without this articulation, how will stakeholders recognise the distinctiveness of the proposition and make informed choices?

[7.] LOSE SIGHT OF BEST PRACTICE WITHIN AND BEYOND THE SECTOR

Institutions must lift their heads to recognise that it is not enough to assess progress against sector peers: increasingly, competition emerges from different quarters and stakeholders develop perceptions and expectations based on generic experience beyond the higher education sector.

[8.] UNDERMINE CONSUMER CONFIDENCE IN THE ORGANISATION AND ITS SERVICES THROUGH POOR DELIVERY

Consumer experience needs to be constantly tested. A critical concern for organisations is the widening gap between what is promised to stakeholders, what expectations are generated by these promises and any mis-match in delivery.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL INSTITUTIONS

So, do any common characteristics of successful institutions emerge?

In Stamp Consulting sector benchmarking exercises, a number of factors are flagged time and time again. While it is easy to outline these in brief, below, the complexity behind these factors cannot be underestimated. Each characteristic considered is the tip of the iceberg in the development of a successful organisation via its management processes, corporate culture and the realism of its future vision.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITIES

[1.] EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP
Well documented, of course, and the subject of much expert comment, strong, effective and credible leadership (in which all stakeholders can believe) remains core to organisational success.

[2.] BIG AMBITIONS DEMAND TOUGH DECISIONS
The ability to make difficult decisions when needed places a real wedge of difference between some institutions and their peers. While higher education institutions are necessarily consultative and democratic, difficult decisions which may be unpopular or even damaging in the short term, must sometimes be made for the longer term benefit of the institution. Similarly, organisations have to be risk aware but will miss major opportunities if they are completely risk averse.

[3.] CLARITY, SIMPLICITY OF VISION AND BUSINESS FOCUS
One of the most commonly evident problems with the stated vision and ambitions of HEIs in the UK is how difficult it is for internal stakeholders to believe or understand them. Keep the plan for the future simple, measurable and evidence based (and remember, it needs its own communications strategy to reach stakeholders effectively).

[4.] BE CONSTRUCTIVELY SELF CRITICAL
It is valuable to examine problems and consider opportunities for change, but only if positive development follows. Avoid corporate navel gazing at all costs.

[5.] EMBRACE STRATEGY, BUT IN ITS PLACE
Developing strategies can consume vast amounts of time, but practical and realistic outputs are required for a strategy to live, breathe and be credible.

[6.] BE FLEXIBLE AND AGILE
Recognise that a corporate ability to think beyond the traditional planning horizons and be agile in the face of unfamiliar challenges is fast becoming a must-have survival tactic for institutions.

[7.] BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF POSITIVE PROMOTION
Many higher education institutions are notoriously resistant to self promotion and celebration, but the benchmarking process suggests that such factors are central to an organisation's ability to communicate its own success effectively and, critically, to generate corporate pride, confidence and loyalty.

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