Outline

Although trends in institutional isomorphism continue to impact the higher education system globally (Cai 2010) creating tension between innovation and standardisation (Stensaker and Dahl Norgard, 2001), new organisational forms and approaches are emerging. Publication of the UK government white paper in 2011 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011) called for a more diverse and competitive system and continued marketisation (Brown with Carasso, 2013) encourages new types of institution. A number of new and small scale higher education institutions in various forms have developed in the UK in recent years along with group structures and different approaches to branch campuses (Gaskell 2012) enabling small institution-like entities to be developed within larger group structures (Gaskell and Hayton 2014).

Rapid diversification of the UK higher education system and unprecedented turbulance has led to erosion of the general stability assumptions that once could be relied upon. This provides a challenging backdrop for any institution, however for a number of small-scale universities, some of which are relatively young and need to evolve to establish themselves quickly, these challenges have particular focus. Although there is a broad body of literature on leadership and management of universities there is little that focuses on effective leadership of small-scale institutions set in a context of unprecedented sector-wide instability.

A small study has been undertaken, supported by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, to gain some insight into the context, leadership challenges, strategies adopted and the learning to be taken from recent experiences of senior executives (vice-chancellors) of small scale, new and evolving higher education institutions in the UK. This paper provides an outline of the study and discusses some of the early findings.

Following a literature survey encompassing policy changes impacting the UK system, organisational forms and the leadership of universities, a process of desk research was undertaken to identify new and evolving small-scale higher education institutions in the UK. Those selected all had less than 5000 students and had gained university status (and in one case University College status) within the last 12 years. The externally observable history, strategies, leadership team structures, and performance metrics were examined and 5 candidate institutions were selected for more in-depth study. The 5 institutions selected provided diversity in terms of institutional type and organisational form.

In each case the senior executive (vice-chancellor) was engaged in a semi-structured interview. In addition to examining the organisational context, journey to date and forward trajectory, the interviews also prompted respondents to reflect on their senior team structures and roles, perceptions of key leadership challenges and desirable attributes of effective senior-level leaders in their particular context. Each interview was recorded and analysed using qualitative analysis techniques (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) and coded (Saldana 2013) to enable theme development. A short, anonymised case study was also developed for each institution.

Several participants highlighted structural change taking place to adjust to the sectoral challenges. In several cases this was in the context of modification of strategic plans to scale down previously ambitious growth targets. A general theme of re-visiting and reducing the pace of planned growth was common with explicit planning focussing on sustainability while remaining small.

Team structures varied quite considerably, but a common theme was that of overloaded roles at the most senior level. There are also particular challenges in dealing with the need to lead and manage internally while also building profile externally.

Development of management capacity (Shattock, 2003) as distinct from leadership capacity (Bolden et al, 2014) was also a challenge that was well cited. This was articulated by one participant as, "I still think a lot of academics in leadership positions … do not recognise the management responsibilities they have.". The relative flat structures necessitated by the scale of these institutions drives empowerment of middle and junior-level managers.

There is strong demand for highly creative leaders within the executive teams of these organisations, able to deal with very significant uncertainty and non-determinism while holding to core mission focus. Motivating academic innovation and entrepreneurship (Kenney, M. 2009) and opening up consideration of fundamentally different ways of doing things was a commonly cited requirement. One vice-chancellor stated, "… probably the business model for the vast majority of UK state funded universities is untenable" and the message is clearly understood that the historical safety net of the previous funding regime has been removed. Supporting colleagues through change (Kezar, 2014) was also a commonly occurring theme and in some cases, this has also been necessary at governing body level.

Resilience is required in the leaders of small and young higher education institutions and a key challenge is to find leaders that that are creative, prepared to innovate, consider very different options from the status quo and be open minded with respect to substantial changes in business model and approach (Kezar, 2014). This is despite their missions often being highly focused and specialist in nature. A strong and explicit awareness of micropolitics (Lumby, J. 2015) is also highly relevant to such small and dynamic organisations.

Clearly the UK sectoral challenges are universal. However, the vulnerability of this sub-group due to the scale and/or relative institutional immaturity, the challenge of dealing adequately with internal and external activities without a large resource base to support dedicated outward facing senior-level roles, and the need to lead a rapidly evolving small organisation in the context of a very dynamic and uncertain sector were all issues in sharp focus.

Although there were some clear common themes across the organisations, no single organisational metaphor was dominant. Relationships to a range of theoretical models were evident (Manning, 2013), with the importance of collegiality clear. There was also resonance with the concept of shared leadership (Bolden et al, 2015). Although further investigation is needed, early findings from this study provide some insight into the leadership challenges of a particular sub group where there is a lack of focused literature to date.

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