

LEADING THROUGH COVID-19
Lessons for HE in Transition

December 2020

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Halpin

Contents

Foreword.....	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
The Narrative	7
Crisis leadership.....	8
Student engagement and academic leadership	9
Staff engagement and support	10
Civic leadership	13
Decision-taking processes.....	14
Culture.....	14
Governance.....	15
Frameworks for Reflection	17
1. Post-crisis quadrant.....	17
2. Psychological contract.....	18
3. Culture anatomy	20
Conclusion & Next Steps	21
Appendix 1: Acknowledgements	22

Foreword



Shaun Horan

This report is really the story of 2020 in higher education. We wanted to get this to the sector so that it can be read, reflected upon, and digested over Christmas, so that new thoughts and approaches can be implemented by leadership in the New Year.

We are incredibly grateful to our Consulting Fellow Ewart for such an in-depth, considered report on the impact of Covid-19 on higher education leadership.

There are many areas for reflection and we hope that the sector finds it both reassuring and useful for future planning. Ewart has brought his trademark wisdom and observations on what it means to be a leader in these times throughout the report.

We'd also like to thank the Halpin Steering Group and the many HE leaders that gave their time so generously after what has been such an extraordinary and demanding year.

If there's a particular leadership challenge you'd like to discuss, don't hesitate to give me or one of my Halpin colleagues a call. We have seasoned experts across all areas of university leadership, and we'd be delighted to help.

The coming year will hopefully see humanity successfully moving to the next stage of the pandemic - what exactly we will face on that side, and what HE will need to do in order to meet the new challenges that emerge remains to be seen, and we look forward to working alongside you as we make those new discoveries.

Shaun Horan

Joint CEO, Halpin

Executive Summary

This report tells the headlines of the *Covid-19 leadership story in higher education* through the eyes of those in key sector leadership roles. The project aims to capture the leadership lessons as we travel through this extraordinary period.

Higher education is a major player in the pandemic story. It is making a profound impact through its research-led endeavours to develop a vaccine and find other treatments and technologies to mitigate the effects of the Coronavirus. At the same time, under challenging circumstances, it is delivering education to nearly 2.5 million students from the UK and internationally, directly employing approximately 500,000 staff, and working with key partners in business, local authorities, and communities across the UK.

The source for this material is 28 structured conversations with leaders, both individually and in groups. The narrative flowing from this is pulled together under the following emergent themes:

- **Crisis leadership:** Developing newfound agility and flexibility in handling change.
- **Student support and academic leadership:** Pivoting between variations of online and blended learning in a process of co-creation between students and staff, balancing quality standards and safety.
- **Staff engagement and support:** Step-change in volume and style of communications, use of online platforms, balancing home working with on-campus activities in teaching and support services; major emphasis on wellbeing and support to address anxiety and fatigue.
- **Civic leadership:** Unique contribution to collaborative leadership at every level of surrounding community, city and region.
- **Decision-taking processes:** Implications of a shift to online meetings: brings agility and informality, but impacts on quality of engagement.
- **Culture:** Many positive lessons about support, compassion, wellbeing and kindness; reflections on shifting expectations in relationships, balancing energy and burnout.
- **Institutional governance:** Reflections on style and flexibility of meetings; risk and post-Covid-19 strategy.

Questions and frameworks are offered to encourage reflection around these themes, to be used internally within institutions or across the sector in webinar conversations.

It is a story of major achievement and success, but also one that has understandably generated anxiety, tension and controversy. While focusing on the current story, the report invites university leaders at all levels across the sector to find the opportunity to reflect with staff and students on lessons learned and to look ahead to beyond the pandemic crisis. A key challenge for the future is to decide which of those different dimensions of running our universities should be retained.

This is an **initial report**. We are not yet completely through the most intense phase of the pandemic. This project will continue through 2021 to refine the methodology, maybe to widen the community consulted, to capture the lessons, and to reflect them back to the sector.

Introduction

“It is time we are open with ourselves, our students, their parents and the government: this academic year is really, really rough. Alongside this, we have no idea when the broader situation will change. However, if we accept that fact, work together as a community, and stop feeling guilty or blaming others, there are huge opportunities for all of us to be really well prepared for the changed world and the different workplace once the pandemic is behind us. And our students’ learning outcomes will be very good. We can only do that if we also take time for calm reflection and take care of ourselves and each other, as we deal with the present challenges as effectively we can.” Professor Simone Buitendijk.

This quote was from an [article in November 2020 for WonkHE](#) by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds. It happens to express the essence of this project, with its themes of working together as communities, avoiding guilt and blame, and above all **finding time as we go for calm reflection** as we grapple with the uncertainties of the rollercoaster ride we are on with Covid-19 and reflect on the HE sector’s achievements.

The best leadership development does not have to come from an executive programme. It is often a more profound experience if we find the space and opportunity to reflect on real issues as we experience them, particularly from crises as stretching as our present one. But, for it to be effective, it needs related contextual data from outside our immediate experience and frameworks, within which we can undertake reflection individually and with colleagues.

This report aims to offer an initial framework for reflection by telling the stories of extraordinary challenge and change as university leaders and communities have grappled with Covid-19. It constantly raises the question as to what we can learn from this unique experience for the future shaping of UK higher education in a period of major transition and challenge for the sector. It does not attempt to replicate the huge amount of operational advice in relation to teaching, research and management that has come from Universities UK, GuildHE and Advance HE.

Methodology

The aim was to capture the leadership learning from the Covid-19 experience and to reflect on its lessons for the future in a sector which was already in transition before it hit. The project was scoped with a number of sector stakeholders and the help of a Steering Group selected by the Halpin Partnership (see Appendix 1).

We then selected around 25 universities for structured conversations at senior leadership level. The universities selected were from across the UK, with a good cross-section of sizes and mission groups. There was also engagement with the further education sector to pick up stories of wider collaboration during the pandemic, as well as acknowledging a key agenda of government as it examines the potential for change in the FE/HE landscape.

We really appreciated the willingness of HEIs to participate, and particularly the involvement of Vice-Chancellors. We had no difficulty in finding our 25 participating HE institutions, and in the end, we held 28 in-depth interviews with individuals and groups which included the conversations with the FE/College sector. Each conversation lasted up to an hour and involved telling the story of handling the Covid-19 journey, with opportunities for reflection, within the following framework:

- From your current experience of managing through Covid-19, what are the leadership and governance lessons your institution is learning? The positive stories, and the challenging stories?
- In addition to the core issues about delivering a safe and fulfilling student experience, what are the other critical business issues nationally and internationally?
- To what extent have the current pressures (Covid-19 and others) encouraged you to engage more closely with other institutions?
- How has it affected the network of civic and stakeholder relationships in your city/region?
- Have the current pressures encouraged you to explore the potential gains from some form of shared services and partnership arrangements?
- What has been critical in maintaining a high commitment from academic and professional services staff during this period?
- What key management and leadership skills are critical/in short supply?
- How can the experience and input of Council/Court members be of particular value?
- What changes would you want to retain even if Covid-19 were to disappear completely?

There was no attempt to undertake any quantitative analysis of the data. It is far too soon for that, but it might be possible and revealing at a subsequent stage. The aim in this first phase was to capture the raw stories, triangulate the emerging themes into a coherent narrative, and draw out a framework of learning points. Everyone we spoke to was happy to participate in follow up conversations as we continue through the Covid-19 journey. All participants were assured that this would be conducted and written up in a confidential and anonymised manner.

What also emerged as a framework for the narrative were the multiple *dimensions of leadership* which the Covid-19 story drew upon, often simultaneously. The list of leadership dimensions, by no means exhaustive, included:

Leading Through Covid-19 – Lessons for HE in Transition

Ewart Wooldridge

December 2020

- Crisis handling
- Academic
- Financial and business
- Professional administrative and estates services
- Technological
- Cultural
- Compassionate and wellbeing - for students, staff and stakeholders
- Resilience
- Civic and regional
- Reputational
- Engagement and communications
- Project and change management
- Governance
- Strategic reflection and development

All of these dimensions of leadership emerged within our conversations and created the framework for reflection.

The Narrative

Covid-19 2020: a rollercoaster storyline of impact, achievement, and challenge.

When this project was first conceived in June 2020, it was potentially dealing with the prospect of major crises in the sector resulting from the pandemic. At that point, the picture at the beginning of the autumn was looking to include significant institutional failures for a number of universities that were in the 'at risk' category. So we expected a major part of the report to be concerned with reconfiguration in the form of collaborations, partnerships and mergers. We had pulled together sources of expertise and advice in that area, including some who had advised on mergers over the last 20 years.

But then came the A-level chapter of the story in August, which significantly (and in some cases dramatically) increased the number of UK students being accepted for 2020. Also, fears about a dramatic drop in international students enrolling did not materialise. So the threat of existential failures went away, and in the case of one institution we talked to, the boost from increased UK student numbers transformed their business prospects.

So the narrative that follows may not have that kind of dramatic flavour, but it is still a powerful story of managing change, anxiety and uncertainty. The issues surrounding the possibility of business failure by a number of 'at risk' institutions may not have gone away, but they are not the focus of this report. Some still have argued to us that one of the consequences of the Covid-19 episode may be an intensification of the marketisation of HE and an increase in a widening gap between 'winners and losers'.

The strongest spotlight naturally fell on the NHS as the central players in the Covid-19 crisis. But what has emerged from these interviews across higher education is a story of extraordinary innovation and agility in HE both within its own field and as a key partner in related sectors such as health, local government and business. At a headline level, many universities' world-class research capabilities have been at the forefront of dealing with the devastating effects of the Coronavirus - vaccine development, ICU technology, mitigating treatments for the immediate and long-term symptoms of Covid-19. Often their close connection with the NHS through their medical schools and allied nursing provision meant that they were a key source of additional medical staff for hospitals, as well as providing PPE equipment, additional space for medical support, facilities and staff accommodation.

Reflection 1:

The civic role of universities is well established and is dealt with later. But are there lessons to be learned from the intensive health and community care engagement with their surrounding communities during Covid-19, with positive implications for their reputation and profile? With the potential for an even more competitive environment in HE, can these reinforced civic and community leadership links provide any reassurance? Is there still a medium-term prospect of an increase in the number of 'at risk' universities?

Crisis leadership

Whilst many universities may have ‘seen the threat coming’, particularly if they had close connections with China and Southeast Asia, the reality was that the whole sector was faced with immediate disruptive change on a major scale in March 2020 when the Government announced the first lockdown. All universities were required - as far as was possible - to send students and staff home, and to implement a complete switch to online learning, called by many the ‘Pivot’.

This happened remarkably efficiently and most claimed to have effected it within days, and certainly within a week or two. As more than one interviewee said, if times had been normal and they had proposed a shift to fully online learning, the combination of consultation, committee and administrative time would have meant that implementation would have been of the order of at least a year, and in many institutions considerably longer.

Many acknowledged that the mode of online learning that was put in place needed significant enhancement. Most had to combine creating this virtual learning environment with continuing support to safe working spaces on campus for those who had to carry on working in key research areas (particularly in health) and in estates and security, where student residential buildings were still housing students who could not return home.

All universities had to introduce some kind of crisis-oriented leadership system. The majority of those to whom we talked utilised variants of the “Gold, Silver, Bronze” crisis command structure used by emergency and public services for major incidents across the UK. Most institutions had these arrangements embedded in their business continuity planning. These were hierarchically structured, separating out the levels respectively for Strategic, Tactical and Operational command. Some institutions, particularly smaller ones, chose to use their existing leadership structures to manage the crisis. Others were actually concerned to avoid the hierarchical ‘military’ connotations of ‘Gold/Silver/Bronze’, and to retain and encourage devolved leadership as far as possible. The ‘third tier’ of leadership was regarded as absolutely critical.

Almost all interviewees stressed the mental and physical strain of managing the Covid-19 crisis with its ever-changing dimensions. Unlike some other sectors, ‘HE never closed’. Throughout the whole period from mid-March they were continuing to deliver teaching either online or blended, facilitating (in many cases) on-campus research, supporting international students, responding to the uncertainties of the A-level crisis and admissions in the summer, and then planning and implementing reopening for the autumn semester in a blended learning environment - with the complication of protecting the health of students on campus in a variety of lockdown scenarios.

Interviewees were ironically amused by the use of the term ‘*new normal*’. For most of them, it was a case of: ‘*What’s the next normal, and how long is this one going to last?*’ And at the time of writing (end of 2020) that evolving series of uncertainties is continuing, and the sustained and unpredictable nature of the Covid-19 crisis continues to sap away *energy*, one of the essential characteristics of effective leadership.

Reflection 2:

What changes - if any - would you make to the business continuity and crisis management systems in the light of the Covid-19 experience? What lessons have you learned about maintaining and refreshing leadership energy in this kind of scenario? (The issue of resilience is picked up again later in the report).

Student engagement and academic leadership

The March 2020 lockdown prompted the immediate shift to online teaching across the whole sector. Referred to as the ‘Pivot’, it was probably one of the most abrupt changes the academic community has ever experienced. It required the whole education system to accelerate their engagement with online teaching approaches and provided academic leaders with huge challenges and opportunities in relation to pedagogic innovation. In terms of leadership of change terminology, this was a veritable ‘tipping point’.

The detailed and continuing rollout of that innovation, and the debates around it, are ongoing as the journey, which started as almost 100% online, has now evolved into a range of blended solutions depending on the discipline subject areas and the scale of local lockdown required. The detail of that pedagogical dialogue is the subject of countless learned articles and not for this report.

But a number of issues came up in our interviews about leadership. A critical factor was trying to create a culture, which many found uncomfortable, that *there was not a perfect solution, that experimentation and ‘getting it wrong’ were ok*. Support and encouragement were critical, whilst an industrial relations dispute seeking to shift back from blended to online provided a tense backcloth in some institutions.

What came through strongly was a determined effort to create a community of practice of students and staff in which it was acknowledged that this was a collaborative journey where support was needed by all. The emphasis was on an increased shift from a culture of *teaching* to one of *learning design*, where the learner was even more at the centre. Supporting this, we encountered a range of variants of collaborative leadership, where students and staff were co-creators of a blended learning offer, in discipline-led environments.

Achieving the ‘right’ decisions in this area was hard, and involved staff whose anxiety was probably fuelled by a rich mixture of concerns about pedagogy, health and safety. The strong theme from our conversations was the need for leaders to listen even more to the student voice. But equally, there was a concern from HE leaders that many teaching staff will just want to ‘get back to normal’ when Covid-19 goes into retreat. The issues are summed up well by Professor Stephanie Marshall, Vice-Principal (Education) at Queen Mary University of London in a [recent HEPI blog](#):

“Key to fully realising the value of this pivot to a new, technologically enhanced pedagogic approach for higher education is this continued commitment to co-creation of the blended

Leading Through Covid-19 – Lessons for HE in Transition

Ewart Wooldridge

December 2020

learning offer and taking our students with us on the journey. *University leaders need to embrace the pioneering spirit, think creatively and constantly trial new approaches. Data will be key, with a real need to monitor closely engagement trends to appreciate quickly the impact of the new approaches and – if necessary – adapt them.* It is only by embracing these principles that universities can truly realise the potential of the new ‘paradigm’ and support new generations of students to enjoy the benefits.”

As these initiatives were being developed and refined to optimise the student *learning* experience, the ability of the university to deliver an acceptable student *social* experience was of equal importance. There was the pressure in the autumn semester to look after the health and safety of students in contact with Covid-19 cases within their halls of residence, and there was a wealth of examples of the initiatives taken to create the new forms of that social experience, including online versions of freshers’ week for newly enrolled students.

From a leadership point of view, there was a careful balance to be struck between enforcing Covid-19-safe regimes and allowing sufficient space and discretion. As reported in the press, at the most intensive periods of Coronavirus outbreaks, there were some highly charged campus scenarios, which had to be handled firmly but with great sensitivity. Some of these were very challenging for student services, estates and security staff, and institutional leaders. But many in our conversations reported outstanding examples of collaborative leadership with their Students’ Union representatives, which reflected the same spirit of goodwill found in the co-created approach to online and blended learning already reported.

Reflection 3:

The pivoting between online, blended and face-to-face pedagogy has so far been the most visible and complex set of changes to university life in the Covid-19 story. What are the leadership lessons so far from the way the change has been led? How far are members of the academic community “embracing the pioneering spirit, thinking creatively and constantly trialing approaches”, to use Stephanie’s words? And what lessons and fresh ideas have emerged from having to reframe the student social experience?

Staff engagement and support

Every university we spoke to told a story of a dramatic increase in the volume of communications with staff, simultaneously with a shift in March from face-to-face to online engagement, and from campus working to home working. Whether due to the convenience of the online medium or the importance of receiving a briefing, all interviewees reported that attendance at briefings had risen dramatically. Whilst that may have been an obvious consequence, what was consistently noticed was that staff were much more likely to ask questions and actively engage when they were attending online, as opposed to physically. Maybe it took less courage to click on the MS Teams ‘virtual hand’ or put a comment or question in the chat room than put up a hand physically at a town hall meeting?

Leading Through Covid-19 – Lessons for HE in Transition

Ewart Wooldridge

December 2020

But it went further than this. Despite the limitations of the online platforms, the communication process itself had become more informal. Many commented that a process of ‘democratisation’ was taking place. Relationships were treated as less formal and hierarchical. One Vice-Chancellor commented that he used to prepare for his video addresses to staff as though they were TV broadcasts with a very formal set up and using high-quality technology. He now just put it together himself, recording briefing on his phone, and dressed casually.

The beginning of the first lockdown in March ushered in a hugely intense period of collaborative cross-university working initially to effect the pivot to online teaching, and to support the remaining research and other campus facilities for students and staff who for various reasons had to remain on campus. And that was followed quickly by the need to plan for and implement a safe and supportive environment for the autumn return of students to campus for the myriad of variants of blended learning. Although some staff shifted their workplace back to campus, the majority continued to deliver much of their teaching or professional and support roles mostly from home. The evidence from the conversations was that this changing set of scenarios over the period, particularly with the autumn return of students, required a much more collaborative relationship between academic and support services staff.

Much of the discussion about leadership in this area was about the steps that were being taken to support anxious and fatigued staff and managers. As has been reported extensively in the media, working on MS Teams or Zoom may obviate the need for commuting, but somehow lengthens and intensifies the day. Working at home often involved back-to-back online meetings, which then had to be dovetailed with family, education and caring responsibilities. Most institutions to whom we talked found it important to establish and agree on guidelines on ‘media-light’ days, “*Teams-free*” Fridays and so on, and all offered support in relation to health and wellbeing.

And as they are starting to look ahead to a less Covid-19 dominated world, there is a dialogue to be had about looking to a new balance between home working and campus working, and online and face-to-face.

From a leadership point of view, it has brought critically to the fore the issue of wellbeing, mental health, support and resilience, and as more than one senior leader said, a realisation that it was important to exercise the emotional and compassionate dimensions of leadership more than the intellectual side. He noted that this was not always the case when times are normal!

Reflection 4:

In this area of the Covid-19 story, the scale of change was huge, and it would be helpful to reflect on lessons learned about the leadership of change and the handling of key relationships between academic, professional, and institutional leadership, balancing top-down and bottom-up. At the same time, there are significant issues about changes to the paradigms of learning, teaching, campus operation and working styles, and which of these changes are to be retained in a rebalancing of university life. There are also major implications for estates utilisation, and many were reappraising their estates strategies.

Leading Through Covid-19 – Lessons for HE in Transition

Ewart Wooldridge

December 2020

Civic leadership

It is a given that universities have a key role in civic leadership, but the Covid-19 crisis has provided a unique opportunity to step up the level of collaborative leadership at almost every level of the community, the city or the wider region - and of course nationally in the research and development of vaccines, intensive treatment technology and mitigating treatments for the immediate and long-term treatment of Covid-19 symptoms.

The detailed list of those fresh civic leadership initiatives given to us in our conversations would cover many pages. Headline examples include offering part of a campus for a Nightingale hospital and other emergency back-up facilities, Covid-19 testing centres, housing for nursing staff, accommodation for the homeless, food banks, car parking and supply of PPE, sanitisers and other equipment. This all required the maintenance of support services on campus even though a large proportion of staff, and - for a while – students, were not there.

At the same time, universities had their civic leadership responsibility to be ‘good neighbours’ in their communities. In some cities, with intensified case numbers and large numbers of locked-down students, this placed a serious burden on managing neighbourhood relations where student residences and domestic housing were in close proximity. There was a premium placed on high-quality communication with key community leaders and contacts. All those to whom we spoke were communicating as frequently with external community leaders, stakeholders, Councillors and MPs as they were within their own community.

In many cases, senior leaders in HEIs were making available their multifaceted experience to play a major part in the system leadership of their surrounding city and region.

Those university leaders we spoke to in the devolved parts of the UK generally found the more direct relationship and communication with their devolved administration helpful.

Reflection 5:

The Covid-19 experience so far has demonstrated the powerful added value of universities as collaborative leaders in their surrounding communities, cities and regions. There is now the opportunity to reflect on whether aspects of this more closely connected relationship might be embedded on a permanent basis, recognising of course that in many cases that has already been achieved.

Successful reputational leadership is a vital dimension of top leadership roles in universities, and there is no doubt that the Covid-19 experience has provided an important opportunity to demonstrate this particular strength within a civic context. It is worthwhile to reflect upon how that reputation had been enhanced by the Covid-19 experience, and could be built upon for the future.

Decision-taking processes

Much of the narrative so far has illustrated the significant and sometimes substantial departures from 'normal' procedures of decision-taking. Most dramatic was the lockdown and crisis-driven decision to effect the pivot to online learning in March 2020. Many institutions had already been experimenting with this direction of travel, and some were quite far down the line of developing new strategies of blended learning. But what was clear was that all were able to make the step-change within a remarkably short time.

Later in the spring of 2020, they were starting to make plans for some form of blended offer in the autumn, which was not undertaken in quite the same crisis mode of decision-taking as in March. And they were resuming established processes of consultation with students and staff, and their representatives. But in our conversations, they told us they were conscious of increased agility in their decision-taking processes. That may have been due to the continuing context of the pandemic 'crisis', or to the use of online (MS Teams/Zoom, etc.) platforms, or because there was a greater sense of 'community' decision taking.

There clearly were tensions, and in many institutions there was the issue with the unions about the shift back to blended/face-to-face learning as opposed to continuing with online. But in most of the institutions with whom we talked the dialogue remained constructive.

In the section on governance, we will talk about this issue as well, and there is no doubt that the use of online platforms produced a different framework for decision making. Key features reported to us were greater frequency of meetings, better attendance levels, more informality, less paperwork and an increased pace. Because of the intensity of general communications, more were up to speed with the issues.

Reflection 6:

It would be of value to reflect on whether that agility and informality can be retained when we move out of current restrictions and back to more conventional decision-taking processes.

Culture

The narrative so far has conveyed a story (to a varying degree) of a less hierarchical, more informal and collaborative style of university leadership. We have heard that barriers have been lowered, and it has been easier to innovate and co-create solutions between students and staff. The ability of many to work flexibly from home has itself made a significant impact on the culture, though it was noticed in some conversations that this flexibility was largely denied to those such as support and estate services staff whose job inevitably required them to be on-site, often in stressful situations. As one interviewee said, "We were all in the same storm but in quite different boats". So it seemed that, on balance, the crisis has strengthened the sense of community in institutions, but there is probably still the feeling of different cultures, with one of the dividing lines linked to those who have to go on campus and those

Leading Through Covid-19 – Lessons for HE in Transition

Ewart Wooldridge

December 2020

who have the discretion to work online wherever possible. This raises questions that did not come across clearly from the conversations as to how far the crisis had affected the values of the institution, particularly in the areas of inclusiveness and engagement. Maybe this will emerge more clearly when follow-up conversations are held in the new year?

What did emerge was a strong emphasis on fostering a culture of support, compassion, kindness wellbeing and trust. And there was no doubt that the crisis, reinforced by these values, *energised* the culture, and gave a much greater sense of momentum and resilience.

Most of the universities to whom we spoke had produced values-led frameworks to define the kind of inclusive and collaborative culture that they felt was necessary to see them through such an unprecedented episode in their history, and to create a picture of their vision for the university in a post-Covid-19 world.

In a [recent Big Education blog](#), Sir David Bell, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sunderland set out some of the key values and principles that were now guiding him even more strongly through these complex times as we face up to the gaps in what we can and cannot control:

- admit that the decisions we make could turn out to be wrong, and move on quickly;
- listen to as many people as possible;
- be humble and transparent, yet confident in self (not the same as bombastic self-confidence);
- substance always matters over 'spinning the positive'; and
- insight and empathy are vital components in the leadership toolkit.

Reflection 7:

We need to capture the ways that our institutional culture (behaviours, stories, relationships, preferences) has changed during the extraordinary pressures of Covid-19 and reflect on those aspects we feel we should carry forward to more 'normal' times and those we should retain only for equivalent crises.

Governance

It would be incomplete to cover the leadership lessons for universities of the Covid-19 story without reflecting on the implications for governance.

In all the conversations we had with HE leaders, there were consistently positive comments on the contribution of Council members and Chairs to give rapid feedback and advice, building on their breadth of experience from other roles and sectors, and engagement with key stakeholders in the locality. Very regular briefings were given to Council members, and the expertise of Finance Committee members was drawn upon to deal with the critical issue of cash management, and Audit Committees in relation to risk management.

Leading Through Covid-19 – Lessons for HE in Transition

Ewart Wooldridge

December 2020

All Council meetings and Committees had to move online, despite university regulations and statutes, with the reported effect that business tended to be handled more flexibly and informally. There were some concerns that MS Teams (the most frequently used platform) only allowed nine participants at a time to be seen and made interaction and debate difficult, and removed altogether the opportunity for useful informal conversations 'in the margins of the meeting'.

As institutions plan their way out of the Covid-19 crisis into whatever normality will emerge, it is clear that Councils will be playing a key part in reviewing strategy in a world already rendered uncertain by issues such as pensions, Brexit, and evolving future government policies on funding and the interface with further education. The balance between online, blended and face-to-face pedagogy will also be a matter of joint concern between institutional and academic governance.

Reflection 8:

Councils will need to conduct their own reflection on how well crisis leadership and business continuity plans worked out in practice, and what lessons the Covid-19 style of operating had for ongoing arrangements for the frequency of meetings; the balance between online and face-to-face; the style and length of papers and briefings; the balance between risk aversion and appetite; the links between academic and institutional governance; and schedules of delegation.

Frameworks for Reflection

This report has offered suggestions for reflections following each part of the narrative. In this section there are some additional suggestions for frameworks for that reflection in dialogues either within institutions or in cross-sector conversations.

1. Post-crisis quadrant

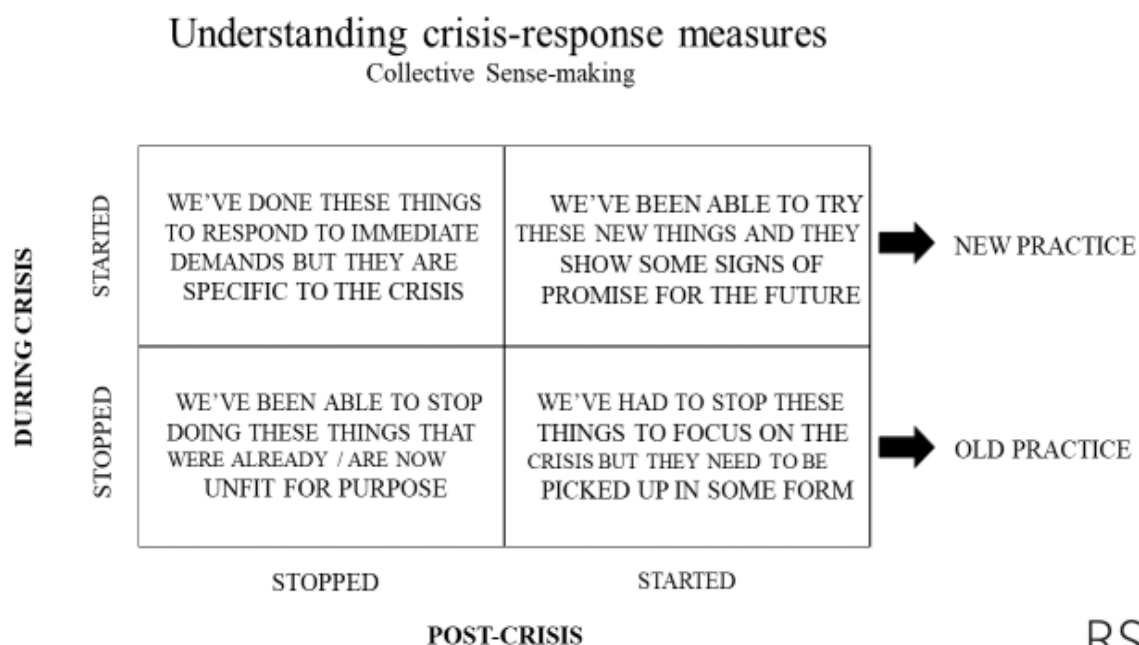
In a very thoughtful monograph for the Further Education Trust for Leadership, called '[Leading, Learning and Lockdown](#)', Sir Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University made the following observation:

*“It turns out, though it may not have been apparent at the time, that leading in a crisis is relatively easy. It may be demanding and exhausting, but the decisions to be made are, by and large, sequential, and teams are united around the dynamics of the crisis. It can even be energising and engaging. But leadership **out of a crisis** is far from easy. Adrenalin levels have fallen; the immediate unity of purpose around responding has begun to fray; pre-existing tensions come into the picture; the number of questions to be answered multiplies; there are fewer obvious stepping stone or handholds; the sequencing of questions not only breaks down but plays into other tensions. The order in which questions get asked, and the importance accorded to them, is contested. **Leadership out of a crisis is exceptionally difficult.**”*

We are sure that all universities are already into the process of reflecting exactly how they will land in a post-Covid-19 world, what newly learned behaviours and practices they will want to hold onto, and which ones were only appropriate for crisis management and need to be stored away in the memory drawer for the next one.

There are still many unknowns as to whether the HE sector playing field is going to become even more competitive, whether it will become more differentiated between winners and losers, whether the number of institutions 'at risk' will change, and whether the increased agility we have learned through the Covid-19 story will be critical to surviving and thriving.

This simple framework offers a starting point for the post-Covid-19 reflection:



Author's Note: (As a Fellow of the RSA, I would recommend this framework, for which a more detailed description and range of scenarios are available from Ian.Burbidge@rsa.org.uk in an RSA report with the title "[Understanding crisis response measures: Collective Sense-making](#)".

2. Psychological contract

The majority of issues in the conversations were about the nature and quality of relationships between key communities of interest:

- Students
- Staff
- Stakeholders
- Leadership and governance

The psychological contract is a way of defining the *reciprocal expectations* between the key players in any organisation, often summed as 'the deal'. It is about clarity of understanding and expectation, sense of fairness, mutual respect and authenticity and there is quite a lot of evidence that those expectations (which are about perceptions, beliefs, obligations,

Leading Through Covid-19 – Lessons for HE in Transition

Ewart Wooldridge
December 2020

boundaries, and the dynamics of relationships) have been changed during the Covid-19 episode.

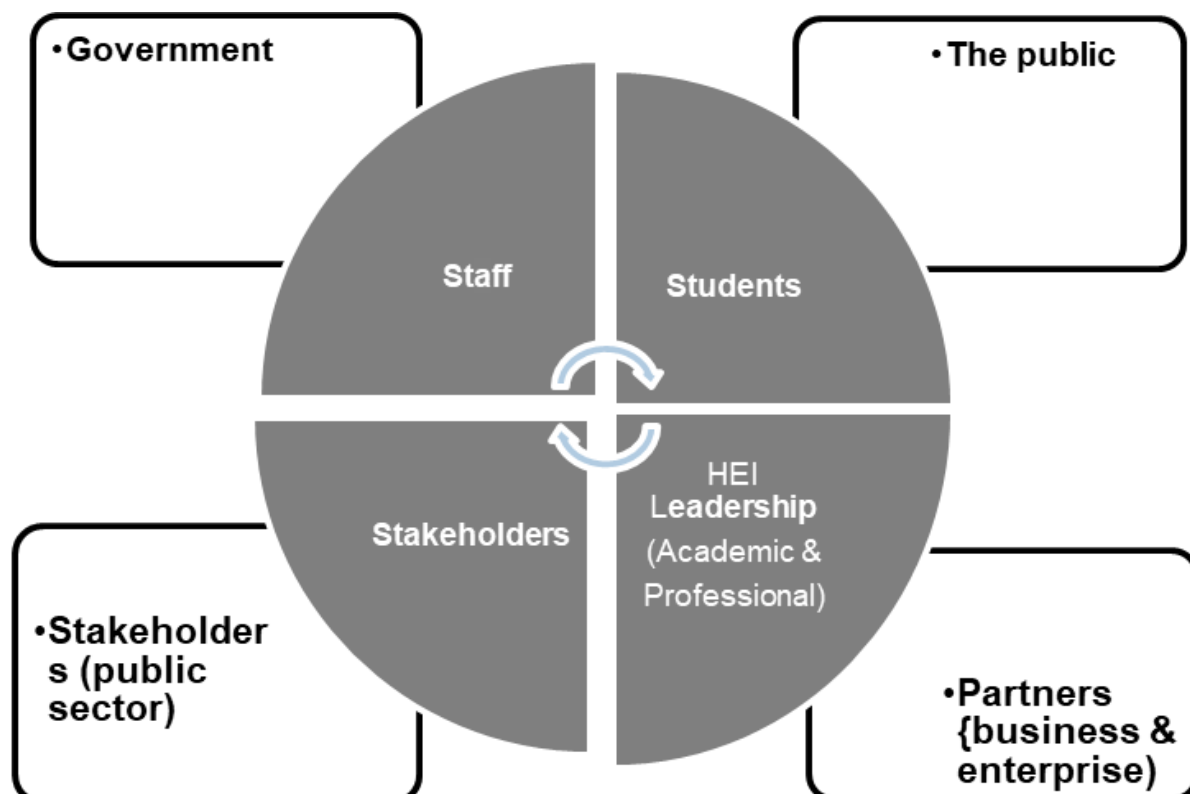
In our conversations many building blocks that underpin the psychological contract have shifted:

- How staff work
- Where staff work
- How students study
- Where students study
- How decisions are taken
- At what level decisions are taken
- The boundaries between home and work
- Uncertainties and anxieties – but also a greater investment in support and wellbeing
- More intensive engagement with the surrounding community and stakeholders

This is by no means a definitive list, but it could provide the starting point for a reflection on what changes have taken place and which are the lasting ones that it will be important to hold onto.

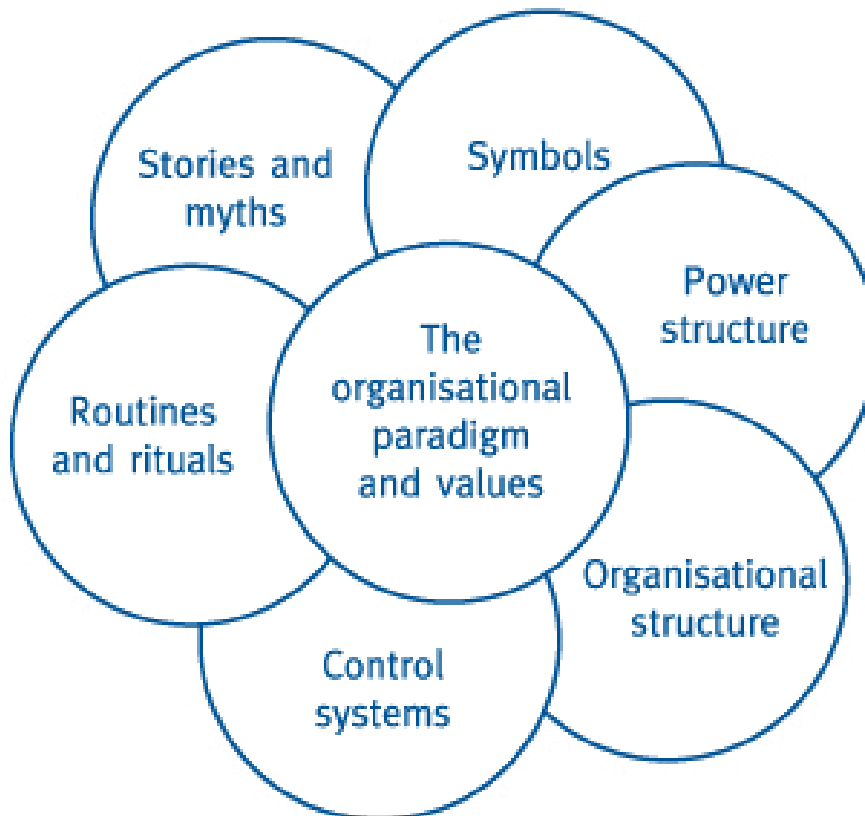
A healthy psychological contract (where reciprocal expectations are clear and can be flexible and agile) can be an important foundation for resilience.

Below is a model around which to base the conversation.



3. Culture anatomy

Much has emerged about institutional cultures. Another useful framework is the paradigm of the culture anatomy (or culture web) which can be used as a basis for a reflective conversation on what shifts have taken place during the Covid-19 episode:



Ref: Marshall, Stephanie 'Culture anatomy' from 'Strategic Leadership of Change in Higher Education' Routledge 2007, and 2016 (second edition)

Conclusion & Next Steps

For every sector of the economy, Covid-19 has produced the most disruptive change they have ever experienced. There are theories of organisational change that actually extol the virtues of disruptive innovation. Some may have found that this particular disruption has been an energising catalyst. Others may just have found it exhausting!

As we continue to lead our institutions through and out of this extraordinary period, it is crucial to find the time and opportunity to pause and reflect on what we have learned and can hold on to. This report has been produced in real-time as this disruptive change has been happening. It is a first attempt at capturing the learning and will be followed up in the spring when there is a little more reflective distance. During that period, HE will continue to be in a period of transition as it works through the impacts of other disruptions such as the pensions challenge, Brexit, funding and fees uncertainties, and any government-inspired changes in the interface with FE.

We are extremely grateful to the many HE leaders and others who gave us quality time and have also said that they are happy to continue the dialogue in 2021.

Appendix 1: Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Halpin Steering Group who each gave their time, thought and input so generously:

- David Allen OBE – Halpin Consulting Fellow and Chair of Higher Education Funding Council, Wales
- Shaun Horan – Joint CEO, Halpin
- Judith Lamie – Education Consultant
- Joanne Marshall - Director of People and Campus Services, University of Bradford
- Professor Stephanie Marshall – Vice-Principal (Education), Queen Mary University of London
- Shakira Martin – Halpin Consulting Fellow & Head of Student Experience, Rose Bruford College

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Ewart was the founding Chief Executive from 2003 to 2013 of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, set up to play a key role in developing UK and international HE leaders and their institutions. He has a well-established portfolio of consultancy, coaching and governance roles in the HE sector, and currently works with Halpin.

He was previously Chief Executive of the Civil Service College and a Chief Officer in Local Government. Before that he worked in HR and general management roles in the media, television, and the arts. He was Director of Operations at London's South Bank Arts Centre in the mid-1990s.

Ewart was awarded the CBE for services to leadership in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2004. He was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by Cardiff University in 2012 and received an Honorary Doctorate from the Open University in 2014.